# NEW WORLDS
## SCIENCE FICTION

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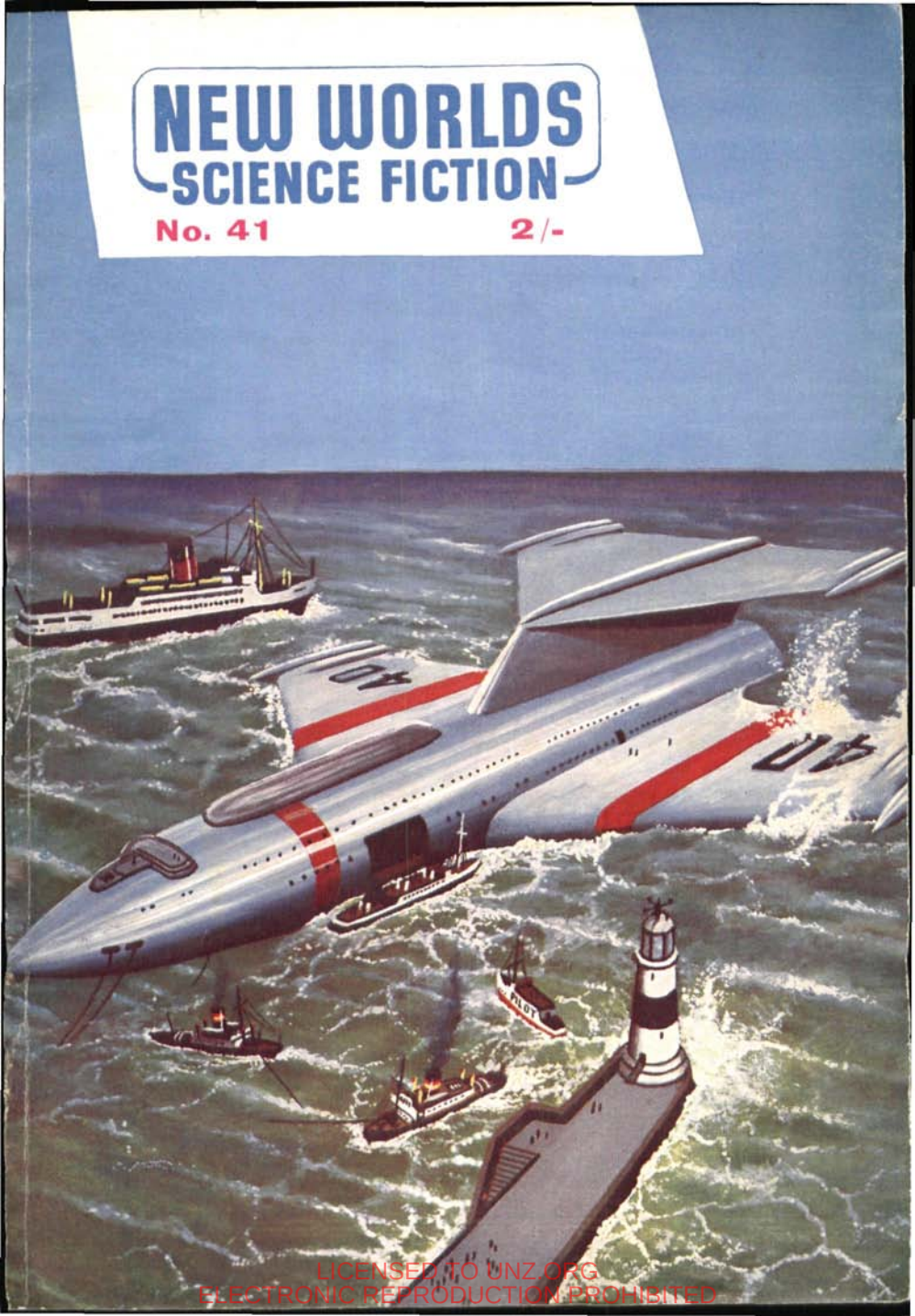

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# NEW WORLDS

PROFILES

## WILSON TUCKER

Of Bloomington, Illinois, USA, whose serial *The Time Masters* comes to a conclusion in this issue has innumerable short stories to his credit plus a number of mystery and science fiction novels. His new book *Time Bomb* has just been published in America by Rinehart and is apparently a sequel to our current serial.

## FRANCIS G. RAYER

A popular British writer who has for many years consistently presented good fiction as well as hundreds of technical articles dealing with radio and electronics and general science. His only published book, *Tomorrow Sometimes Comes*, has seen numerous foreign translations as well as appearing in the Science Fiction Book Club.

## LAN WRIGHT

Finds little time during the summer months for writing fiction as he is a keen cricket player, but makes up for this lack during the winter when he produces mainly long novelettes usually based upon contact between alien and Earth technologies. His story in this issue is one such example.

## JOHN NEWMAN

An industrial research chemist who has written most of our scientific articles for the past two years and thoroughly enjoys the necessary investigations some of our editorial suggestions force upon him — especially this month's information which took several week's to work out, simple though it may seem when read in printed form.

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# NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

VOLUME 14

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# New York in '56, But . . .

Numerous air letter dispatches were received from author Kenneth Bulmer following the three-day World Convention in Cleveland, Ohio, early in September, at which he was officially Britain's representative, most of them slightly incoherent as can well be understood after any such 72-hour marathon. Even in Britain the tendency is for all-night sessions of entertainment and discussion after the normal daytime business programmes have been concluded—in point of fact, it is the social side of these events which cements the bonds of friendship and allows the ordinary fans and readers an opportunity of talking to the professionals on a fraternal footing.

The highlight of this year's major American Convention was the bid by London for next year's Convention to be held here, although the American " World " Convention has in reality been a domestic North American gathering since its inauguration in 1939, only once having been held in Canada. But to such extent has science fiction grown in the ensuing sixteen years that the water barrier of the Atlantic no longer applies and there is a constant two-way traffic of personalities between Europe and America. Even while the Cleveland Convention was in full swing America's foremost science fiction author, Robert A. Heinlein, was in Britain for a few days at the end of a European vacation.

Chief contender for the 1956 Convention site was New York City where the first national Convention was held in 1939 and most Americans agreed that it was time that city had a return visit. London's bid therefore, placed by Kenneth Bulmer, was something of an anti-climax, being the only other one in opposition to New York. Author Wilson Tucker and leading science fictionist Donald Ford both spoke on behalf of London and after the New York delegates had expressed their viewpoint the proposals were about to be put to the vote when Britain's delegate withdrew London's bid in favour of New York and made a strong appeal for London to be the Convention site in 1957.

As Kenneth Bulmer states, " New York had gone to a great deal of expense and enthusiasm with advance publicity and propaganda on their own behalf, including a huge board in the hotel entrance covered with letters from New York public bodies welcoming such a Convention in their city (including one from the Mayor's office, and hotels all clamouring for the privilege of having the Convention site). It was obvious that New York was already geared to a high degree of proficiency in planning and preparing for such an event and although London had already made tentative plans for a World Convention in the Spring of 1956 an additional year of preparation would be a great advantage for us.

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" The withdrawal of the London bid had already been decided by leading British personalities before I left England, providing that it looked certain that New York both wanted the 1956 site and were prepared to handle it—it being felt that that city was long overdue for the national American Convention. I therefore had no hard feelings over withdrawing our bid and took the opportunity of building up London as the 1957 Convention site. This will, of course, be determined by the delegates in New York next year, but at the moment there is a very strong feeling amongst Americans for the European trip the year after next.

" In fact, a number of them have already made enquiries regarding chartering a plane for the journey which would cost no more than tourist passage by ship. It is also felt that an American fan would be sent as a Guest of Honour to London under similar arrangements to those which applied to myself and sponsored by the Trans-Atlantic Fan Fund. This is purely an internal American decision but we can expect to see an official American delegate in Britain during the next year or two.

" One of the most outstanding items of business at Cleveland was the formation of a World Science Fiction Society inaugurated by David A. Kyle of New York for the responsibility of all future world Conventions, thus the new organisation would take over the executive and administrative work in preparing for each year's national Convention and assist the local city Committee in their preparations."

Between 500 and 700 guests registered at the Hotel Manger in Cleveland for this year's Convention, which had humour as one of its main highlights, many fine speeches being made by such well-known personalities as Isaac Asimov, Robert Bloch, Anthony Boucher, and others.

British fans have sufficient time to plan an outstanding World Convention but it seems to me that a national Committee will have to be formed immediately with a central Committee in London comprising secretary, treasurer and publicity, to handle all the advance details. One thing is very evident—Britain will not be able to throw together a World Convention in the same manner as this year's Easter gathering at Kettering, where practically everything was left to the local committee and consequently the formal programme was practically non-existent. London will have to cater for a large influx of people who have never attended a Convention before, and consequently will have to see that every minute is planned carefully and of outstanding interest to everyone.

*John Carnell.*

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*Innumerable stories have been written concerning a cosmic disaster overtaking the Earth; in fact, the theme has long been a favourite with novelists in the general fiction field. Few writers, however, have instituted an object approaching Earth at infinite speed and consequent infinite mass into their plot—but, let the author tell the story..*

# THE VOICES BEYOND

## By Francis G. Rayer

Illustrated by HUTCHINGS

Frank Dickon wrote, "*There is thus no proof that alien life forms exist anywhere in the cosmos,*" and put down his pen as the telephone rang. At thirty-four he had the philosophy to accept such interruptions without irritation.

"Dickon here." He wondered who was phoning.

"I was afraid you'd be out, or not answer." The voice was crisp, clipped, easily recognisable.

Frank smiled slightly. "Might not have answered if I'd known it was you, Bob. You're aware I fixed a clear month to complete this thesis—"

Bob Willow seemed not to be listening. "You're free?"

"No writer is ever free."

"But this is something you should know!"

There was an urgency in the words which even the phone could not conceal. Frank sighed. If his day's work was to be ended before properly begun, it would not be the first time. He regretfully eyed his manuscript.

"Tell me, Bob."

"It's not a thing I can *tell*—!"

Frank experienced a shock which brought his five foot ten bolt upright in the worn office chair. "You're not wanting to drag me all the way from London to Brecknock?"

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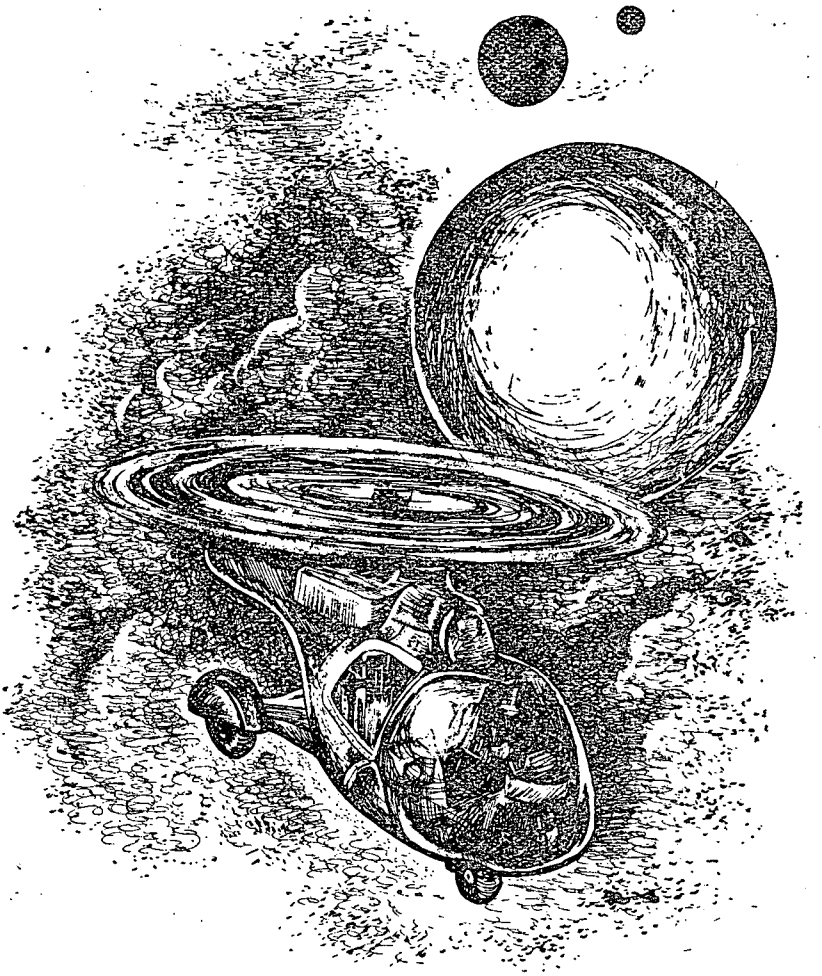

"Just that." There was a pause. "What's more—*throw away all you've written, before you come.*"

The line went dead and Frank cradled the silent phone. Bob knew how to gain his point with few words, he thought, and frowned. *Throw away all you've written.* An odd thing to say.

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He debated the possibility of ignoring the whole thing, knew he could not, and locked away his papers. Bob would not phone from Wales unless the reason was important.

London was busy. Her population, at least, did not believe in extra-galactic life, Frank thought as he drove north to meet the main Bristol-Colchester arterial. There, he turned west for the Bristol tunnel, emerged at Newport, and struck up through the Welsh mountains for Brecknock. The summer sun was high when at last he wound up a narrow road in the Black Mountains and the sedan clock showed he had been a full four hours on the way.

The Brecknock Observatory emerged from behind trees as he negotiated the final bend. White, it was perched on an artificial plateau cut in the rock. The barrel of its 200 in. reflector telescope pointed at a spot in the heavens near the zenith. Frank garaged the sedan by the other vehicles in the covered park hewn from the mountain side and took the lift up through the rock to the observatory level.

The air was cool and clear, the view magnificent. A man on duty inside the door touched his forelock.

"I'll tell Mr. Willow you're here, Mr. Dickon."

Bob Willow was dark, thirty, and his blue eyes danced with enthusiasm. Frank followed him to the building lift.

"Pretty sure I'd come, weren't you!"

The other pressed the top button. "You know me better than to think I'd bring you out here for nothing."

"Perhaps."

They emerged in a corridor circling the observatory dome. The 200 in. was running under synchroclock control and seemed to be maintaining its bearing against the rotation of the earth. Bob Willow gestured to the eyepiece couch on its ponderous adjustable mounting.

"Take a look first."

Trust his friend to come to the point, Frank thought as he mounted and relaxed against the padding. Seeing was not good. The field of view was near the sun, and the upper air unsteady.

"I had it on the cross hairs," Bob Willow stated from below.

It was there still—an object the like of which Frank had never before observed in the heavens. Slightly pink, it was a perfect, uninterrupted sphere. Its sunward side shone. It might have been a steel ballbearing planted in the field of view, without blemish or marking.

Frank watched it for several minutes, then slid his heels on to the ladder. Curiosity drew his brows close.

"What is it?"

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" That I can't say." Bob Willow's upturned face seemed to have lost some of its youthfulness. " I first saw it nearly three hours ago, and gave a report. Every observatory in this hemisphere is watching it."

Frank held the cool steel of the ladder rails. " It is—approaching ?"

" I can't say. Its appearance is the same as when I first saw it. There has been no angular deviation. The telescope clockwork is only correcting the earth's rotation. If the object is moving, it's either directly towards us, or directly away. The motion relative to us must be slight. That, and its distance, I can't say until the directional cross and radiosonde figures come in, which I expect any moment."

That was all he knew, Frank saw. He peered again into the depths of the shimmering heavens. The sphere hung with apparent stillness in the centre of view. It might be a world, remote beyond the solar system, or very much smaller and nearer. Strange, it was poised against the backdrop of space. Something of its chill seemed to seep through and Frank straightened his shoulders against the cold finger that moved up his spine.

" Have you no radar ?"

" No. We're not equipped for that kind of thing here. I asked Cardiff airport to try a range reading, but they got no result. However, that may only mean it's beyond the range of craft-landing equipment."

Below, they waited for the other observatory bearings to come in. With declination crosses the distances of the object could soon be calculated. Frank wondered what the result would be. Unfathomable, remote, the pinky sphere lay beyond the sounding distance of the airport radar. That was all they knew.

Elizabeth Parrish struck a wrong note, said " Damn !" and closed her eyes momentarily against the immortal arpeggios that had lived three hundred years. The stirrings and promptings came again into her mind, whispering, inarticulate, fading again to nothing. She rose abruptly, crossed the apartment, and pushbuttoned a number on the videophone. The screen lit with the words " Telepathic Institute."

" Give me Mr. Folkes," she said.

Moments passed and a kindly face of fifty-five appeared on the screen. The man smiled in recognition.

" You wanted me ?"

Elizabeth nodded, conscious that there was a slight tension round her lips. " I asked to be let off any further tests this month."

Monty Folkes raised his brows, iron grey as his hair. " What makes you think we may not have done that, Miss Parrish ?"

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She hesitated. If the Telepathic Institute was making an unscheduled test to discover exactly how receptive its members were, he would have been expecting her to ring. Yet his surprise looked genuine.

"I can't play," she said. "Instead of Beethoven there are just—voices—"

"So you thought it was us?"

"Of course."

His eyes were intent on her face. "I'll check and make sure."

She waited, Folkes's voice a mumble on his inter-office phone. When her conscious mind was actively engaged the voices ceased. Yet they had been very insistent.

He reappeared. "We have made no telepathic tests whatever in the last twenty-four hours."

"You're sure?"

"Beyond doubt, Miss Parrish." Folkes pursed his lips. "Was there any articulate message? Or anything we could go on? You've always been among our best telepathic receivers. What did your contact say?"

"I—I don't know." She knew it seemed weak, especially from her. "There was no real contact. It only seemed that something was trying to contact me—"

"*Something*?"

The quick interruption jerked her to a halt. She felt confused. "Someone, I mean."

There was no more to say. The Institute was not trying some unscheduled test. Perhaps it had been imagination . . .

"I see. You'll ring me again if anything arises?"

"Yes, Mr. Folkes."

Unsettled, she stood at the apartment window. Below opened one of London's lesser parks, green as a patch of countryside under the sun. The mist sprinklers were playing, moistening the whole area so that rainbows played against the trees. The air was clear as that of a country village, devoid of dust and fumes by the advent of atomic power. Children ran on the grass, happy voices drifting up. She watched them, letting her mind lie open. Nothing came, now. No other thoughts tried to reach across to her subconscious.

Perhaps it was all imagination, she thought. She returned to her instrument and sat down to try to play.

Bob Willow tapped his notes with the slide rule. "The figures all agree. If anything, they make the mystery deeper."

Half seated on the desk, Frank nodded. Though the airfield radar could not reach the object, more powerful equipment had. Their

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findings agreed with directional distance crosses, and explained why no report had come in from any very distant observatory.

" Only just over seven hundred miles away, near as I can calculate," Bob Willow said for the fifth time. " I never imagined it to be so close."

Frank looked up at the great telescope, motionless upon its celestial axis while the earth revolved. Within hours the pinky sphere would be below the horizon, because of the planet's rotation, and observatories far away to the west would get their first glimpse. He calculated mentally. They had settled that the speed of approach was about twenty-two feet per second. That was fifteen miles per hour. At that velocity the sphere would reach earth in forty-eight hours.

" Has it struck you its speed is less than that of an object in free fall ?" he asked.

" It has." Willow's blue eyes were lowered upon his notes.

" Which undoubtedly means—"

" That it is not in free fall, and thus influenced by other forces." He rose jerkily, put away the notes, and went to the steel ladder. " With a knowledge of its distance I can get its approximate diameter."

He lay on the couch, adjusting micrometer hair-line gauges. *Forty eight hours*, Frank thought. Little enough time indeed. Staring up, he saw his friend stir on the couch.

" I'd say it's about five hundred feet across."

He came down. Twice in the following hour Frank looked at the object. Each time it hung exactly as before in space. Its apparent increase in magnitude was so far too slight for the eye to detect. Later, two powerful cars drew up below and five high-ranking officers appeared in the observatory, stared in turn through the telescope eyepiece, and departed, conversing together.

Frank had a last look at the sphere. Nearing the horizon, it glinted redly. Seeing had deteriorated and sunset was coming.

" It's path is straight as a die," Bob Willow said as he went into the garage. " I'll ring you if anything develops."

The mountains dropping away behind, Frank wondered what the next forty-eight hours would bring. Little enough time indeed !

The drive was uneventful. He did not hurry and it was midnight before he let himself into his rooms. The city was growing quiet, her millions seeking sleep. He stood by his window a long time, watching the blink of the neons which never went out, and wondering what conceivable object could be five hundred feet in diameter and maintain a steady velocity of twenty-two feet per second against the gigantic pull of the earth's gravity. Later, he turned over his manuscript ruefully, and went to bed.

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When he awoke it was daylight and he realised a voice had disturbed him. An urchin voice, calling as it approached. There were still people who preferred to read at their own leisure, and he pushed up the window as he had a hundred times before. He dropped a coin. Neatly folded, the paper landed almost in his hands.

" Thanks, mister !"

Frank opened the paper and his sandy brows rose. While he slept newsagencies and foreign correspondents had been busy. Some newsman had coined a neat word to cover his ignorance :

ELECTROIDS SIGHTED BY PEKING & SAN FRANCISCO.

*News reports received late last night reveal that three unidentified objects have been observed at high altitude. Authorities in Washington, Moscow and London deny knowledge of their origin .*

There was a lot in similar vein. In brief, Frank decided, the copywriters knew little, but sensed a nine-days' wonder. He wondered if Bob Willow knew more.

The line was busy. Only after a long delay did Willow's voice come. Frank decided to waste no words.

" I've just seen the paper. Are there *three* ?

" There are." The voice sounded tired. " It's as neat a V formation as you ever saw."

" But there was only one yesterday !"

" No—we only saw one," Willow corrected. " We were too busy keeping that in view. The others are roughly one hundred miles behind, and far enough apart to be outside the field of view. Anyone can see the three at once with the twenty five inch. I've been up almost all night listening to the reports. They're travelling straight as a line, and haven't changed speed by any amount we can detect."

Frank looked at the wall clock. He had slept well. It had been forty eight hours—and was now forty.

" I'll probably be out to look," he said.

Willow said something inaudible. " I'll get you in if I can—but the top brass has moved in !"

" Bad as that ?"

" Colonels, generals—the whole shoot."

It did look like an emergency, Frank thought as he rung off. The streets below his window were busy, normal as on a hundred other mornings. He dressed, breakfasted, and was wondering what could be done when his videophone rang. A strong, lined face of about forty-five which he did not recognize came on the screen. Frank glimpsed a crown and two stars at the shoulder.

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"You are Mr. Dickon?" The voice had the clipped authority of a man accustomed to obedience.

"Yes." Frank thought the stern face could be kind.

"I am Colonel Northwood. Your name has been given to me as a possible authority upon—upon—"

"Alien or extra-terrestrial life-forms," Frank prompted. "That is so. I have studied the possibilities of such, but of course my knowledge is of necessity theoretical—"

Colonel Northwood silenced him with a gesture. "Obviously, Mr. Dickon. Nevertheless, even theoretical knowledge may be helpful. I will send a staff car for you at once."

The screen faded to mute silver. Frank bit a lip. The trip to Brecknock would have to wait. Northwood had assumed he would help without question. The assumption was justified.

The staff car drew up as he left the building. The driver saluted, closed the door upon him, and Frank watched the streets speed past. They turned in through grey stone portals, swept across a barrack square, and Frank was conducted through passages that rang to their quick footfalls. Colonel Northwood rose as he entered and gripped his hand momentarily.

"Consider we are talking civilian to civilian," he said, "not soldier to soldier."

An aide stood by the desk. Other officers were in a group by the window.

"No other man in the country appears to have made a study of alien life-forms," Northwood stated, his gaze keen. "It is, as you say, theoretical."

Frank saw that an explanation was expected—required. "Observation gives an idea of possible conditions on our adjacent planets. From those it is possible to deduce what kind of life might exist there. Similarly, spectrum tests enable a star to be classified. From that classification it is possible to say what planets might exist. Assuming certain planetary conditions, it is then feasible to say what forms of life could be maintained."

Northwood jerked a glance at the officers as if some opinion he had expressed had been justified. "You are aware of the three approaching objects?"

"The electroids?"

"We may call them that. They appear—artificial?"

Frank nodded. "Their speed is less than objects in free fall. They are symmetrical, and apparently in formation. Therefore I would classify them as vessels. If so, contact might be established with the life forms they contain."

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A silence grew in the room. Frank felt every eye upon him. These men were ill adapted to deal with such situations, he thought. Efficient, disciplined, their minds nevertheless moved in set patterns. Their expressions were those of men who played chess and abruptly found three new pieces of unknown purpose among their opponent's set.

"What else would you advise?" Colonel Northwood asked quietly.

Frank considered. "Every attempt at contact first. But preparation for defence simultaneously. Only possible attack if unavoidable . . ."

By mid-day the news had reached everyone in the city. Men hurrying home paused to stare heavenwards, striving to discern some glint in the sky. Others used binoculars, but fleecy cloud came on an east wind and the blue of space was obscured. A stir ran through the city, unseen but sensed. It was, Frank thought, as if the day were suddenly different. No longer was it a summer day like any other summer day. Instead, it was a milestone, a turning point.

It was mid afternoon when his tyres once more thrummed up the winding road and Brecknock Observatory, perched on sun-drenched slopes, came into view. A military picket guarded the road, The young officer apologised on seeing his pass.

"We're only stopping idle sightseers, sir."

Bob Willow was not in the dome. Catching up on lost sleep, Frank guessed. Men were talking in groups, all seeming helpless. He mounted the steel ladder and lay under the eyepiece. The sphere was dead in the cross hairs, pinky, perfectly smooth and without marking. Its apparent diameter had swollen visibly. It was near the three hundred and fifty mile mark now, he supposed. Its two companions, spread in a V behind it, were outside the field of view. He watched it for a time . . . twenty two feet per second, fifteen miles per hour, always imperceptibly nearer with each passing moment.

At last he went down. Bob Willow came in from the elevator door. He had obviously slept little.

"I won't list the exact data," he said. "It's all near enough our first figures. The three are travelling straight as a line ruled through the heavens. During the whole period of observation they've not changed speed or direction."

Frank saw a twitch about his lips and guessed his thoughts. The earth would revolve once more, then . . . "Has anyone assumed their speed and direction might remain unchanged, and calculated the impact points?" he asked.

"I have. They would strike obliquely, because of the planet's rotation—the first in London, with the others near Liverpool and Paris."

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An hour later Frank left the observatory and decided his next call must be at the military radio depot near Reading, from which attempts at communication were being made. The specialists gathered at Brecknock had told him all they knew. Little enough, he thought. None of the electroids had changed path or speed by the slightest extent. Earth might not have existed. Her gravity had not modified their progress. Observed through the two hundred inch reflector telescope, each exactly resembled its fellows. Perfect spheres, slightly pink and wholly without markings, they had no visible means of propulsion. Each five hundred feet in diameter, they defied gravity and speculation alike.

At the Bristol side of the deep Severn tunnel Frank halted, clicking down his window. Above a news-stall bulbs were spelling out headlines. "FIRST ELECTROID WILL STRIKE GREATER LONDON . . ." A crowd had already gathered and he drove on. apparently someone had heard Bob Willow's remark, and talked.

The radio depot was a collection of concrete buildings and steel masts at the hub of five acres of neat grass ringed by ten feet high netting. Directive parabolic reflectors pointed at the heavens. Inside, the technicians had the expressions of men faced with an unwelcomed puzzle. The officer in charge welcomed him.

"We were instructed to expect you, Mr. Dickon."

Frank guessed the result. "You've had no success?"

"None." The officer's tone implied he was not surprised. "We have used the highest power and beamed on them signals of every wavelength. Every possible form of modulation has been used. If they are keeping any kind of radio watch whatever it must be obvious to them we are trying to establish communication."

"You have had no response whatever?"

"None, Mr. Dickon."

Frank went with him into the operating rooms. He had anticipated difficulty in setting up intelligible communication, but not in establishing contact. An alien race would have no mutual basis for conveying intelligence, initially. But that could be slowly overcome. Lack of all contact was a different matter.

All available listening equipment in the building was in use. Except for static and identifiable earth transmitters, there was nothing. If the electroids had radio, it was not in use, or not operating upon any frequency tunable.

All three were sharp and clear on the radar screens. Their velocity of approach had not changed. Back in his office, the other looked grave.

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"If their course and speed is unchanged, one will strike London within the twenty-four hours, Mr. Dickon."

"I know." Frank looked skywards from the window. Every directive aerial pointed mutely towards the electroids, invisible still to the unaided eye. Twenty four hours . . . He put his back to the window.

"It is our duty to protect ourselves," the officer stated. "If communication fails, we must use other means."

Frank nodded. Self preservation was a strong instinct. "Such as force?"

"Yes. Authority has already been given for guided and automatic missiles to be launched. They will not be used until necessary—"

His tone was significant. They would wait. If there were no signals, no change in course, the electroids would be blown to fragments in the stratosphere. Mankind must protect himself and his great cities. Regrettable but necessary.

The night passed without any signal or reply of any kind from the three objects sliding through space towards the earth. Somehow Frank had expected none. Yet the objects must surely contain living beings, who must in turn be aware of the planet directly in their path. He knew that a dozen governments were preparing rocket missiles.

He sought Northwood's office. The Colonel had obviously not slept.

"So today brings zero hour, Mr. Dickon," he said.

Frank knew what he meant. Around noon the first electroid would be over London—or destroyed.

"You'll blast them to dust?"

"I fear so." Northwood spread his fingers over a pile of scattered documents expressively. "That's the only plan everyone agrees upon. And it's to be done while they're still high enough to avoid danger to us. I'm not altogether happy—but the decision is not mine."

Frank felt keen disappointment. The first alien life—to be destroyed utterly, unseen . . . "What altitude is deadline?"

"Twenty miles. If there are no signals or change of course by then, the first electroid is to be annihilated. The others are a hundred miles behind it. When they reach twenty miles they get the same, if there's no sign that they're friendly. The Paris government wanted to set the limit at forty miles, but twenty gives enough safety margin."

"Not many hours left, then."

"Few enough," Northwood agreed sombrely.

Frank left him. The aerials were still trained on the same point in space. The radio silence was unbroken. If the three objects had

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radio, they were not using it. He was leaving the main building when a messenger came from the offices.

"A Mr. Willow is asking to speak to you, sir."

He led the way inside to a phone. Bob Willow's voice was urgent, impatient.

"I've been trying to get you this past hour!"

"Sorry, Bob. What happens?"

"Have you communicated with the electroids?"

"No." Frank wondered what was on his friend's mind.

"Then there's something you should look into. A man called Monty Folkes has been here. He tried to phone me from London but there are so many officials here the lines are tied."

"Never heard the name." Frank wondered if it was that of some quack. Quacks were apt to pop up on occasions like this.

"Nor had I," Bob Willow stated. "But he'd driven all the way here, and seems sincere."

"And what did he tell you?"

"It's not himself he wanted to see me about, but a young woman he knows called Parrish. Seems they're both members of a telepathic institute—"

Frank felt his nerves tighten. Telepathy! Contact of mind with mind—alien with earthling?

"*Yes*?" Abruptly he knew that every moment counted.

"Folkes says she came to him, worried. He came to me, because Brecknock Observatory was mentioned in all the papers. It's not my pigeon, but yours."

"Where is this girl?"

"In London. I'll give you the address."

Frank bit his lips as he scrawled it down. Time was so short. Perhaps too short.

He left a note asking Colonel Northwood to stand by for a possible message from him, ran for the staff car which had brought him, and within minutes was on the London road. As he drove he repeated the name. Elizabeth Parrish. Certainly unknown, as was that of Folkes. Telepathy was an inexact science. That, and Northwood's deadline, complicated a matter already difficult.

As he drove he realised that this day was not as others. Driving fast, he encountered no single vehicle travelling towards the metropolis. Yet the other half of the dual way was busy. Buses, turbocars and lorries flowed from London. Articulated coaches sped by, every seat occupied.

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Near the city's rim the traffic increased. Every vehicle was crammed, every road from the town congested. A lorry and trailer, both loaded with standing people, had overturned. The traffic had some to a halt, then flowed over into the opposite half of the dual way. Frank braked, crawling on with blaring police siren, his vehicle alone against the tide that flowed from London.

He cursed sensational news reports. On an overturned newsstand a banner poster still flapped. "FIRST ELECTROID WILL STRIKE LONDON." Vehicles, overflowing from a road junction, were driving on the pavements. Panic had turned men into white faced maniacs. Fleeing, no one paused or looked at his neighbour. When heads turned it was skywards, eyes screwed against the summer sun.

A huge passenger vehicle emerged from the melee. Frank looked for space to turn aside, but found none. Inside, people were flattened against the windows, white faces peering out. Voices were screaming at the driver. High in his cab, the man slipped the vehicle into low gear. Like a squat-nosed land-ship, it burrowed against the police car's side. The car slewed, tipping, and Frank sprang, a reflex action that carried him into a shop doorway as the huge coach moved on, clearing a way into the traffic stream by the force of its whining engines.

The shop was empty, unlocked. He went through it and found himself in a quiet back road. The road crossed a bridge which looked down on a railway yard. A passenger train was derailed. It appeared to have happened when someone had moved the points to divert the train from a mass of people who were clambering into goods truck beyond. The trucks jerked forward and someone screamed. Frank turned his back and began to jog towards the heart of the city. The majority of London's millions could not hope to escape from the city. Time was too short.

Farther on, the rumble of many vehicles no longer echoed over the roofs. The streets were quiet, singularly free of conveyances of every kind. At some corners little groups stood. Others passed him, walking rapidly. From time to time every head turned skywards and anxious glances searched the heavens.

The address was comparatively near. A small cul-de-sac ended at a modest grey stone building with *Telepathic Institute* on the door.

Frank rang. Almost immediately the door opened. A girl looked down at him from the steps. Slight, golden haired with dark eyes, there was an arresting, quick mobility to her features.

"I'm Elizabeth Parrish," she said. "I've been waiting."

He stepped in and she closed the door. A sparsely furnished room led off the hall. She closed that door too, as he entered, and stood with her back to it.

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"I didn't think anyone would come, but waited," she said.

He saw lines of strain about her eyes and her lips quivered. "I came the instant I heard—I wasn't at the observatory." He wished time was not so short, and telepathy so inexact. "You know something about—the electroids?"

"I'm not sure." Her gaze was unwavering. "I felt something was trying to reach my mind and suspected they were making an unscheduled test here. They weren't. I tried to dismiss it, but the voices went on."

She hesitated. Frank realised how critical he must appear, a scientist evaluating, perhaps scoffing.

"Tell me everything," he suggested. "I am not a disbeliever."

He turned to the window, looking down into an open alley, hoping her confidence would be restored the more quickly now his scrutiny was ended.

"It's not easy." She sounded relieved. "Something seemed to be striving to reach me, or the mind of anyone attuned to hear. It was odd, strange, unlike the contact of any ordinary person's mind—or, indeed, the mind of any *human*—"

She faltered into silence. "Go on," he said. A stockily built man had entered the alley and was looking up at the buildings.

"I felt the voices wanted to know something—to *learn* something. When I heard alien craft were approaching earth, I felt it must be them."

He looked at her. "Alien craft? We don't know they're that! Craft have some means of propulsion—have means of changing course, and don't maintain a straight line to destruction! These things have none of the things a craft should have—"

"Yet you believe they are vessels."

He did not deny it. "What were they trying to learn?"

Despair was in the depths of her eyes. "I—I don't know."

It was a whisper. Frank's hope died. As he had thought when first seeing her—time was so short, telepathy so inexact.

"You've no idea?"

"Only that it was very important, very urgent. I feel there are *minds* in those three objects!" Conviction rang in her voice. "I sensed it. I tried to let them know I was aware of them. I may have failed. When a person tries too hard the power goes. Telepathy is something in the unconscious."

Listening, Frank knew this was too slender to stay Northwood's hand. A radio signal, unintelligible, would. But this—never. The governments of Europe would need concrete fact.

Somewhere outside a blue flash blinked on and off. Very high, it glowed momentarily stronger than the sun itself. There was no sound.

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He spun from the window. "There's a phone?"

"In the hall."

The exchange was automatic. But it was a long time before Colonel Northwood's voice sounded curtly, harassed, too. "Military commander here."

"This is Dickon. You've sent up a projectile! The flash was unmistakable! You said twenty miles—"

"It was the French!" Northwood snapped. "They decided to act independently."

Frank saw the girl standing in the doorway, a hand at her throat. "There were living beings in that sphere! Heaven knows where from—but living!"

A delay, then: "The responsibility is not mine." Further silence, then a new voice: "Please remain connected, Mr. Dickon."

Elizabeth Parrish came through the door. "Will they destroy them all—?"

"Perhaps."

There seemed little he could say, less he could do. Even as he waited a second blue flash glinted momentarily through the open door behind her. Then another. He swore. Two more followed, and a chill ran from his brain through every nerve and muscle. *Five* flashes. Five guided rockets with atomic heads. And five hits, beyond doubt. Yet there had been only three spheres.

Northwood's voice came with sudden shock. "Still there?"

"Yes. The three have been blasted to bits, I saw the flashes—"

"None has been blasted to bits." It was a quiet statement, as if from a man suddenly very tired. "The first direct hit was ineffective. The French followed it with four others. Five direct hits—all on the first sphere. It remains unmarked, and has not deviated measurably from its course—"

The line went silent and Frank stared at the reproducer. Five direct hits. Explosive power sufficient to erase five great cities.

What manner of object was the sphere that it could withstand such devastating concussion? His cheeks twitched with the tension. Near the doorway, Elizabeth Parrish let her breath escape in a long sigh.

"They haven't destroyed even the first," she said.

He nodded dumbly. No object built by men would have withstood one-tenth of one of those direct hits. Suddenly the panic which he had witnessed in the city seemed justified. That first irresistible object, now mere hours away, was bent on its unchangeable path towards London. His fingers closed over the girl's arm.

"We're getting out of this—now!"

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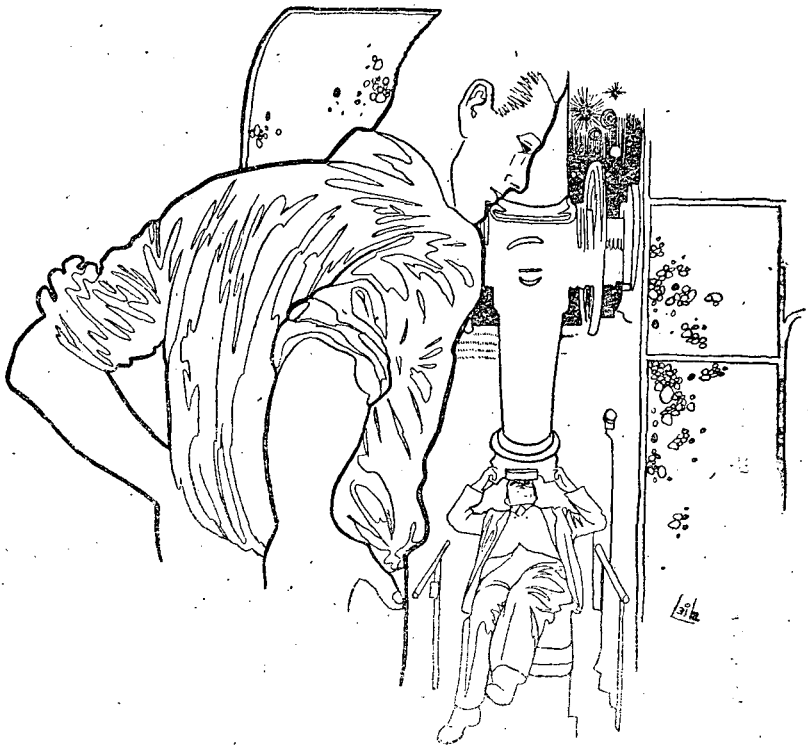

The streets had filled with people staring heavenwards, their faces pale with expectancy. High towards the sun a blue glow burned abruptly, unendurably brilliant. Seconds dragged. Frank counted, marvelling that any object, alien though it be, could withstand such an atomic blast. The sound came at last, a dull rumble filling all the sky and grumbling away in echoes. Ninety seconds. Roughly eighteen miles. The first electroid was that close !

He fancied he could see a tiny, reflective glint up near the sun. A tiny, irresistible steel ball, faintly pink, apparently motionless.

A siren wailed and a military car crawled into the road, followed by two police cars. The people looked, parted, then all heads turned heavenwards again. The car halted and an officer sprang out, He saluted.

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"I was sent to follow you, sir!"

Frank recognised him as being from the Reading depot. "Good! Get us out of this!"

They piled into the car, reversed down the alley, and turned for the city perimeter. Within fifteen minutes they were snaking past slower vehicles also bound out of the city, and the officer manipulated controls on the dash.

"We are in touch with H.Q.," he said.

A flash blinked in the heavens, and a second. Northwood's familiar voice, clipped and urgent, came over the car radio.

"You have Mr. Dickon?"

"Yes, sir. Here."

"Has he any further information?"

Frank leaned over the seat from his position in the back. "None. Things like this take time."

"You have little enough! We are in radio contact with Brecknock. The sphere has not changed speed or direction—"

"Impossible!" Frank gripped the back of the front seat. "There have been direct hits—"

"As you say." Northwood sounded tired, even on the radio. "Several direct hits. Despite these, its course is unchanged and its speed constant. There is no visible damage."

The car bumped over a pavement to avoid two crashed lorries. No change in speed or course; no damage! And that despite direct atomic impacts. It was impossible. Yet was happening, Frank thought. He looked sideways at Elizabeth Parrish. She was watching him.

"I still feel there are living things in it," she breathed. "These distractions prevent contact—but if I could be closer—"

"Being near helps?" Frank realised his working knowledge of telepathy was small.

"Often. It gives more chance for one thought to be found amid others."

She gestured and he knew she was indicating the city behind, where millions of minds must be in turmoil. An idea came.

"Colonel Northwood!"

A delay showed Northwood had been giving some of his attention elsewhere. "Yes?"

"Can you have a plane take myself and Miss Parrish up to the electroid?"

Brief delay again, then: "It shall be done."

Frank sat back, leaving the radio to the officer. The electroid must soon be within range of a powerful stratoplane.

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The city lay below, map like and distant beyond the pressurised cabin window. On every road minute specks swarmed towards the country, unified by common terror. High ahead, the pink curving shape from outer space apparently hung majestically. Devoid of any visible means of propulsion, exit or entry, it was unharmed. Frank felt the girl's fingers close on his arm.

" Look !"

He followed her extended finger. Upon the edge of the sphere, coming into view as the plane rose, was a series of hieroglyphic characters. Contained within a circle of dots, dull on the pinky surface, they in no way resembled letters of earthly origin.

" That is proof beyond doubt," she said quietly.

He did not answer. At first glance through the two hundred inch reflector he had felt the object to be an artifact. No natural body could be so perfect in form. He saw Elizabeth's cheeks were pale, her eyes intent.

" You getting any message ?"

She shook her head quickly. " Nothing definite. There are thinking living things in it. Of that I'm sure. I can sense them. But their thoughts can't get through—and what does seems nonsense."

Her voice sank, quivering. The plane climbed on, near its ceiling. A strato fighter, it was speedy but cramped. The pilot looked back momentarily over his bucket seat. His cheeks were white and his eyes those of a man who was afraid.

" Circle it," Frank ordered.

Earth and sky rolled and the immense globe slid underneath, seeming to rise on their flank as the plane banked into a turn. The surface away from earth was equally featureless.

" The—the things inside seem to be saying their speed is infinite—"

The words were barely a whisper. Her eyes were closed. Her lips moved again.

" Yes, infinite speed—"

Frank's breathing ceased momentarily. Infinite speed ! The speed of light. Mass increased with velocity. At infinite velocity it would be infinite mass. Abruptly it all fitted. Nothing on earth or in heaven could have withstood such atomic blasts—except an object of infinite mass ! Einstein had postulated such mass for an object at the speed of light. And, like everything else in the universe, that speed would be relative. The electroids were travelling at infinite speed relative to the universe of their origin, remote beyond calculation. That their speed relative to earth was only the scant twenty-two feet per second Bob Willow had calculated would affect matters not at all. Frank felt a shock run through his nerves. *What would happen when three objects*

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*of infinite mass struck earth?* Having infinite mass, they would be wholly irresistible. Nothing could turn them aside—*nothing* . . .

He jerked awake to the realisation that the pilot was awaiting orders. "The exact impact point must be calculated and the buildings evacuated—"

The plane banked again, beginning to descend. Looking back through the pressurised cabin top, they watched the globe recede.

*Awesomely huge, the end product of five thousand centuries of scientific technology, the electroids swept on through space, entering the denser regions of planetary atmosphere. Devised by life-forms utterly alien to earth, propelled by forces having no parallel in human science, they had travelled incalculable distances. Originating in an infinitely remote nebula, unswerving in their trajectory through the voids between the stars, they had been built to withstand the ultimate stresses which might assail physical matter. Constructed from metals of collapsed atomic structure, they were impregnable from without and indestructible within. They had tunnelled space while civilisations rose and fell. Within, their builders waited, silent in the glowing radiances of the giant equipment, wondering if the time had at last come...*

The swish of the copter blades above their heads increased as the open machine bounded into the sky. East of the city powerful anti-aircraft guns boomed repetitively, throwing shells that must inevitably reach their target. Below, people stared up at the sphere against which the shells burst, the whiteness of their faces showing the terror Frank knew to be in their hearts. Suddenly the guns ceased. Unnatural quiet filled the heavens.

He took the single seater craft, curving near towards the pinky surface. No mark showed where a projectile had struck. He hoped Elizabeth was safely out of the city.

The markings on the electroid's exterior were undoubtedly letters, words, or numbers. He wondered what manner of being dwelt inside. A man might step into the mud at a pond side, giving no thought for the minute, milling life there.

He knew the sphere's speed and path were unchanged. Never since first sighted had either been modified to any extent measurable by any instrument on earth. Minutes remained. It was coming in at an angle to the horizontal. Had its path been a few hundred miles higher, it would have skimmed the planet and passed on, Frank thought as he rose higher behind it.

A wild stampede began, grew and spread in the streets, from which all vehicles had vanished. Men and women distant from the looming object's path ran, panic sweeping on with the wave of running people.

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Lower every moment, huge, the electroid swept on. A church steeply collapsed, shorn into falling debris. People ran, screaming. Like an express train the electroid went through the tops of two huge buildings, felled three smaller ones into rubble, and struck the road amid running people. Frank saw the buildings opposite rise and crack, heaved from their foundations by pressure below. A rumbling groan shuddered through the air, and a wave rose in the Thames, ran obliquely to the opposite bank, and subsided. A long way beyond, a fragile building trembled and the bearer wall fell, then visible movement ceased.

Banking, he took the copter back over the hole. It was like a hole punched in brown paper with the finger. People were still running from its crumbling rim, edged by an upthrust, volcano-like mound. Beginning at the shorn spire, that same finger might have drawn a line through toy buildings of sand.

A huge plume of steam rose from the hole, rocking the copter. A grumbling roar began, very distant, ceased then recurred ending with an abrupt grating. Glass fell from a score of buildings and somewhere walls collapsed. A further grumbling began, more distant but heavier.

Frank took the machine skimming back to its landing field. Ambulances were speeding towards the ruined buildings, sirens clearing a way through the crowds who stood at every corner. He dropped lower, extending the hydraulic landings legs, wondering where the *point of emergence* would be . . . !"

The twenty-four hours following the disappearance of the electroid were busy ones. Reports from Paris told of similar scenes, and the disappearance into the earth of the second sphere. Near Liverpool, the third glided obliquely into the sea and the waters closed over it. Frank saw Bob Willow and left him calculating where the spheres would emerge if it were assumed they retained their course and speed. When Frank entered Northwood's office Willow was already trying to contact him.

" You really want that calculation done ?"

There was an odd note in Bob's voice, Frank thought. He wondered what had happened. " Of course."

" Allowing for the motion of the earth round the sun, and the electroids' velocity, they'll be under the surface about eleven days. I'll get the exact figures later."

Frank looked at the wall clock. Eleven days ! It was now about an hour and a half since he had seen the first strike London. He felt Willow's tone meant this was not all.

" Yes, Bob ?"

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"There's a little matter of relative motion. Those things came on a straight line towards earth. Right? They rose and set. They might have been making spirals round the planet—"

There was a pause and Frank felt a shock. Spirals round the planet, due to the earth's rotation!

"You've guessed it!" Bob Willow said factually. "For eleven days they'll be cutting spirals round under the earth's crust, due to our rotation. That's all."

The remainder of those twenty-four hours saw a world wide unease which Frank decided exceeded any that a global war might evoke. Seismograph indications confirmed the continued progress of the electroids. A little later, an earth tremor was felt in England. Soon after came news of an underwater explosion in the Atlantic, where sea water had infiltrated into deep, heated caverns in the earth's crust. Volcanos awoke near Lima, and the whole of Chile rocked with earthquakes of unparalleled violence. Frank thought bleakly of the three objects, immovably pursuing their course while the earth turned. Every scientist on the planet had access to reports from every continent, and all agreed that the electroids had deviated by no measurable extent from their trajectory. A third of New Tokyo tottered into ruins. Stresses in the Mediterranean basin became too great. Rock strata snapped, shaking Europe. Momentary equilibrium came. Then water torrented into some unknown cavity deep in the earth's crust, changed to steam, and Sicily ceased to exist. The dust and vapour of her passing dimmed the sun for many hours, bringing twilight to North Africa. The wave destroyed or cast upon dry land every ship in the Suez Canal. And yet, Frank thought, the electroids had not so far made one complete circuit under the earth's crust.

At the twenty-third hour, rumblings could be heard in the rock strata under London. Many people swore they could hear the ominous noises passing westward, as if some huge underground train forced its own tunnel. But experts stated the noise was the movement of rock strata comparatively near the surface, caused by the displacement of even deeper layers.

Bob Willow phoned near the end of the first twenty-four hours. "It'll take ten years for the earth to settle down after this," he said. "We may have worse. A five hundred foot tunnel is no small space for water at ocean pressure. Luckily we can rely on some collapse of strata at that depth, which will block the holes."

"You've calculated where they'll come out?"

"Not exactly. The rotation of the earth has been slowed by nearly a fiftieth of a second—some of those rocks down there are tough. So far the only danger seems to be that the first, which vanished in London,

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may emerge in Chicago. We're working it out exactly." He paused. "Know something? Seismograms show not one of the three has changed speed or course! Infinite mass was the right phrase, though I doubted it when you first said so!"

The words were still in Frank's mind when he returned to his apartment. Elizabeth Parrish was waiting.

"I came a little early to see if you had news," she said.

He let her in. "Little enough. And you?"

She stood at the window with the light striking through her hair. "Nothing new. I want to do something—feel *they* want to—"

"They?" He wondered at the intensity of her voice.

"The—things in the spheres." She raised both hands to her forehead helplessly.

He wondered what the spheres contained. *They*. Mysterious, strange, now tunnelling the earth with the same ease as they had traversed space.

"Will you fly with me to Chicago?" he asked quietly.

"Chicago?" Comprehension came into her clear eyes. "That's where they'll appear—?"

"Yes. I'd like Folkes too. We have several days. You'll see him?"

She nodded. He noticed the haunted look in her eyes, the lines upon her smooth forehead, the tension about her lips. He wished he could help. Clearly she had slept little.

Somewhere very remote a rumbling began, then ceased. The floor shook slightly. Lucky England was based on solid strata, he thought. Even so, no one could be sure.

The videophone buzzed and he went to it. Power failures had put the vision circuits out of action but the voice was the one he had expected.

"I've been into it and had the Brecknock calculator check the figures."

"Yes?" He was glad Bob Willow always came to the point at once.

"Chicago is the point of emergence of the first sphere. The others don't matter. They're in the clear. But this first is smack in the middle of a heavy industrial area. We're already sending on a warning."

"Have their paths changed?"

"No." Heavy finality was in the voice. "Every seismogram agrees on that. I wouldn't have believed it. The only explanation is the one you gave. Infinite mass—thus complete ability to maintain direction against any resistance."

Frank let him finish. "Assuming there are beings in them, would they know they'd struck something?"

"Maybe." Willow sounded uncertain. "They're analogous to

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bullets passing through the rim of a whirling pat of butter. The butter suffers. That's all I can say."

"Hinting we may expect worse earthquakes?"

"We may." There was a pause. "That's all for now. It'll be eleven days two hours between striking London and emergence at Chicago. Expect they'll study the map and evacuate that area.

He rang off and Elizabeth released her pent breath. "*The voices*," she said.

Frank saw her face was pale. "It's that bad?"

"Pretty grim. They *know* something's happening. They keep on and on, trying to tell me." She groaned. "Can we get that plane soon?"

He knew the uncertainty and suspense was doubly hers. "Northwood could arrange a military craft for tomorrow. Think Folkes could manage that?"

She nodded. "He'll come."

Lake Michigan was cold blue beyond the serrated line of New Michigan Avenue. Great centre of world commerce, Chicago hummed with the activity of its seven million souls. Frank followed the sky line with his gaze. In the hazy distance a gaunt block stood square against the horizon. From it branched great power lines, spanning the Michigan River, carried on high pylons into the remote dimness.

"You're certain that's where the electroid will emerge?" Monty Folkes asked.

Frank turned from the top-floor window. Folkes's kindly face had a pinched expression. His iron grey hair was awry, his brows drawn down.

Frank nodded. "Undoubtedly. Bob might be wrong, but the Brecknock calculator is infallible. It was designed for orbital data."

"And what happens when it passes through an atomic pile supplying power to nearly five million square miles?"

His eyes on the map, Frank did not answer. Two days in Chicago had established that the plant could not be moved or made safe in time. Yards of concerte, steel and lead made the heart of the pile bomb-proof. That was no protection, now, but a hinderance. The pile could be damped down at once—but not rendered safe from the destructive passage of the object that would burst up from the earth itself. Experts said such safety could not be achieved in under three month's work.

He met the other's sombre eyes. "We'll be told when the experts have conferred. There's bound to be some release of by-products."

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His mind snapped back for the tenth time to a remark Folkes had made in the Trans-Atlantic plane. The electroids must surely be under the control of the beings riding in them. Communication with those beings was becoming very necessary indeed. He nibbled his lower lip. That, plus the fact that Elizabeth Parrish was absent, sleeping in her room below, plus something else Folkes had said, might give a pointer.

He straightened his back abruptly. "You think the drug you mentioned would work with anyone?"

He was conscious of the hard note in his voice, and of his companion's start. Folkes looked pensive, uneasy.

"The dio-hyptane? It is possible. I told you I had not made tests. because of its danger."

"Does danger to the individual matter so much at a time like this?"

Monty Folkes sat on the edge of the table, his thin frame bent, suddenly much more than his fifty-five years. "You haven't seen the results dio-hyptane has. I have!" His gaze turned up suddenly. "And that's why I haven't used it again, Dickon."

The note in his voice told more than his words. Frank knew the cause of Folkes's intranquility of the past days.

"You thought of using it yourself?"

"I did," Folkes said. "One thing stopped me. It would be fatal. I haven't the physique."

Frank's nerve drew tight. "You established it *did* enormously increase telepathic ability?"

"I did," Folkes agreed slowly. "It relaxes deep levels of the mind —levels that suppress the inherent telepathic ability of normal men."

Uneasily Frank returned his gaze to the Chicago skyline. The evacuation was orderly, in no way resembling London's panic. But evacuation might not be enough. In the silence the videophone buzzed. He crossed, flipped the switch, and saw a man in the green uniform of Chi Atomics. Recognition came into the man's eyes.

"The commission has issued its report, Mr. Dickon. They state it will be public shortly." His hand rose into view, holding a typed sheet. Frank saw strain about his eyes and a lean, drawn concavity to his cheeks. He nodded.

"Please read it."

"Very well." The hand holding the sheet might have trembled, or it might have been transmission flutter. "Destruction of the industrial pile in the manner anticipated will result in the liberation of products probably endangering most of the continent. On the evidence given, the pile cannot be saved. Nor can the by-products be contained —" His eyes rose from the sheet. He licked his lips.

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"Thanks," Frank said thinly. "That'll do for now."

He slid up the switch. The face faded. It was the salient fact that counted, not the commission's recommendations that would follow, mere words that could save only one life in a thousand. In imagination he saw the distant, gaunt building ruined, pouring its deadly ash into the sky. An angel of death would wing on the wind.

"You have dio-hyptane here?" he asked quietly.

Folkes did not look up. "Of course—"

"It is administered intravenously?"

"No, orally." Folkes turned up eyes agonised with indecision. "I am willing to try. If I die no useful purpose will be served, but—"

"A stronger man might not die," Frank said.

Their glances met and he knew Folkes understood. "*Might* not," he said. His breath was held, then expelled. "You'd like me to explain the technique?"

"If you will."

"It's not difficult, but there are precautions. You'd be virtually unconscious at normal levels . . ."

Folkes's voice grew concise, clipped. As Frank listened he knew it made sense. There must be communication. Yet even that was a thousandth chance. Why should the beings in the sphere care, even if they knew? A man who trod living slime at a pond side knew—and did not care. He watched Folkes set a bottle of innocent-seeming powder on the table with lean fingers; heard him explain yet again that only one test had ever been made. The results had been too terrible. When Folkes had finished Frank raised his eyes to the window. A great ship was just gaining way from the pleasure jetty off the avenue. People thronged it from rail to rail.

"You've heard the report of the commission?" a voice asked.

He looked round and saw Elizabeth Parrish standing in the door. Her face was so pale under her light golden hair that she seemed drained of colour. Simultaneously he knew that no footfall had preceded the question.

She came into the room, walking with a curious tenseness. "In a way it simplifies things," she said. "It makes our course clear. We must communicate—"

He marvelled at the levelness of her voice. He knew she was averting her gaze from the dio-hyptane by sheer will. "To communicate might not necessarily solve the problem," he pointed out.

"It would be a good way of trying."

He felt a shock pass through him. In two steps he was round the table and gripped her arm.

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"Let's end the verbal sparring! You've been listening!"

"Why not?" Her eyes were defiant. "If Monty can think of taking it, so can I! I'm young—strong—"

"And a girl!" Frank snapped. "You heard what he said—"

"That it's dangerous? Of course. I'd heard rumours back at the Institute."

"It was kept quiet because others might want to try," Folkes stated harshly.

"Well, and why shouldn't I?" She dragged free, a quiver to her lips, a bright spark in her eyes.

Frank placed his back to the table and his hand closed over the bottle. "Others may think they would like to try too," he said softly. The cap came away in his fingers. "Be silly if two people chanced it together, wouldn't it—?" The powder in his palm tasted bitter. He replaced the cap and put the bottle in a pocket. "Lie down I think you said, Folkes. No conscious control—"

He lay on the couch. There were two tears on her cheeks, he noted. Folkes was pale. Frank felt a current run as from his solar plexus and the room vanished.

A thousand, incoherent thoughts of others filled his mind, secret and dim. For a long time his awareness sat as if amid a crowd of minds. Then slowly came a questioning, on and on, urgent, lacking the stamp of earthmen's minds. Alien, strange, lacking human symbolism, it seemed to call repeatedly for contact. Immeasurably indistinct, it strove to capture his attention. How long the strange whisper lasted, he did not know. Once, there was a contact as of mind with mind, momentary and infinitely startling. It passed, and with it the alien sibilance on the borderland of inner consciousness. Complete silence came.

Frank awoke shivering, limbs like ice. Life returned slowly. A golden head bent over him, near, watching. His nerves felt dead, his heart slow. Dio-hyptane was undoubtedly a powerful neuro-depressant.

"You have been unconscious four hours."

He met the clear, worried eyes and closed his own, resting. He had learnt at first hand just about as much as Elizabeth Parrish had gathered telepathically without the aid of any drug, he thought miserably.

"You've failed," she said quietly.

His strength was returning. "Yes. Where's Folkes?"

"He went an hour ago. Someone wanted you. He went instead."

Frank opened his eyes, rising. "Who?"

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"They didn't say."

"I see. There's something I wanted to discuss with him."

Folkes did not return. Evening came; the night passed. Uneasy, Frank rose early and was greeted by the buzzing of the phone. The caller was in hospital uniform.

"We have a casualty in our accident ward we think you can identify."

Frank felt dismay. "*Can identify* ?"

"He's not dead. Unconscious. Beaten up. You'll come ?"

"At once."

Within fifteen minutes he was walking quietly between the rows of beds. His first glance showed there was no error. Folkes was still as a dead man. A heavy bruise showed at the temple under his iron grey hair.

"He only spoke for a few moments last night," the orderly said. "Just enough for us to trace you. Then he relapsed into a coma again."

"How did it happen ?"

"We don't really know. But apparently some fear-crazed person struck him down and then left him."

Folkes was still unconscious when Frank went. Chicago was emptying fast. Ships stood off the many piers. Road and rail transport worked methodically, carrying thousands hourly. Frank was conscious of a general tension more frightening than the London panic. None of the electroids had deviated from their course by a measurable extent. At the lowest point in their chord between London and Chicago, they remained immutable on their path while the earth turned about them. Seismograms showed they were deep in the planet's semifluid strata. From there they would rise, for five and a half days, boring up through the turning world.

Frank doubted whether Folkes could help. Just how much diohyptane could a strang man take, and hope to live ? Folkes would hesitate to answer.

Outside the hospital he entered a public phone booth. He explained what he had heard, hesitated, and Elizabeth Parrish's eyes met his searchingly from the screen.

"There's something else, Frank."

"Yes," he admitted. "You sometimes worked in pairs at the Institute."

"Occasionally. It was a new technique." She sounded guarded.

"I'd like to try it—with myself under the drug and you aiding." Folkes had talked of the method. One mind was little more than a guide through which the second acted.

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She nibbled her lip. "I'd like Mr. Folkes to help—"

"He's unconscious!"

A pause, then she seemed to reach a quick decision. "As you say, he can't. I think it worth trying. Suppose you come here."

"I will." His hand poised on the switch. "Remember time grows short!"

The building was already nearly empty. Silent corridors and locked apartment doors testified to the slow approach of zero hour. The elevator still operated. He rode to the top floor and found Elizabeth Parrish waiting.

"Frank, you wanted to try—*now*?"

"Yes. Every passing hour may make it too late—"

He dropped silent. There were so many uncertainties. Could contact be made? What manner of being rode in the spheres, and what, if anything, would they do? He wished Monty Folkes could advise them. Too much dio-hyptane would undoubtedly be fatal; too little, fruitless. He wondered what the slim, vividly alive girl standing with her back to the closed door thought. As if understanding his hesitation, she indicated the videophone.

"Why not ring the hospital?"

He did, waited. Waited again while someone checked. Rang off. No use. Folkes was in deep unconsciousness. They thought it probable he would live. Beyond that they would not commit themselves.

He took the bottle from the cupboard where they had locked it. Its contents reminded him of powdery sugar as he poured them upon a sheet of paper, trying to gauge from the amount he had first taken.

"No—more, Frank—"

He met her eyes. Her features had the cold, pinched look of someone gazing on death. He smiled. His lips felt stiff.

"Perhaps you're right. We'll try that."

He sat on the couch, folded the paper into a channel, and tipped the contents upon his tongue. The taste was not unpleasant, he thought swallowing. It acted rapidly, too.

"I'll sit here, Frank."

Her voice was whispery thin. She drew a chair near the couch.

After a time into the darkness of mind crept a second source of thought, cool and sustaining. It fended away the inarticulate wonderings arising in numberless human minds. He felt their uneasy fear slip aside, leaving clear a *questioning* which was not human. Alien,

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wordless, it sprang from some centre of comprehension itself, drawing him beyond the barriers of time and space.

Abruptly, clear as a silver blade in sunlight, contact came into his mind. A living touch upon the core of his brain, it called to him, felt his answer, and expressed relief at the union of thought with thought.

He seemed to be riding in a sphere of immense size that was divided into many transparent cells. Intangible life-forms that moved and thought in unison swarmed their consciousness about him, questioning in the timelessness of pure thought. Inside, the sphere hummed and lights of many hues danced in the shimmering dimness, naked power that held together the shell of an object nine-tenths sheer energy.

The questioning ended and he strove to direct the common pool of thought upon the object's course, living in his mind the result. Comprehension radiated through the minds nearest his, washed through all the cells of the sphere, and came back inarticulately. There was no desire to do harm, none to cause death. Death must be avoided. The sphere's path must be modified. With that thought were complications he could not understand, an anticipation of pain . . . the anticipation became pain, and the pain agony. In each cell a living form quailed, flattening. Stresses sprang into being in the sphere, lancing through the shimmering dimness. From two other adjacent sources other alien minds reached out, sustaining their companions. Amid thunder and lightning the last spark of Frank's mind slipped into unawareness.

He awoke cold, and somehow knowing a long time had passed. His lips were moving. *Infinite velocity. Infinite mass. To turn—turn—*

His eyes opened. He was in bed. Monty Folkes stood near, pale but well. He smiled crookedly.

"We thought you wouldn't make it."

Frank looked past him at Elizabeth. "The electroid—"

"It emerged two days ago—just far enough to one side to knock the wall down and do no other damage."

Frank closed his eyes. The aliens had been brave. Flattened in their cells with a pressure near that of death, no pity or anger had mixed with their pain. Instead had come their last message. He licked his lips.

"They've searched the cosmos for intelligent life to which to give their knowledge. They're braking, will return . . . will be back in twenty years to join us . . ."

He closed his eyes again and slept.

*Francis G. Rayer.*

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*Few people get something for nothing in this world—it is likely to be just as true an axiom on other worlds where religion and culture may widely differ. To a renegade the offer of a kingship on a backward world was the pinnacle of success—he was given everything.*

# THE UNEASY HEAD

## By John Brunner

Illustrated by QUINN

It was with extreme caution, and after the most careful survey of the neighbourhood with his detectors set at the maximum sensitivity, that Ehlert set his ship down on the third planet of a reddish sun just as the terminator was covering the continent of his choice with a thick layer of night.

As soon as the pressure of hard deceleration gave way to the more constant effects of a surface gravity about nine-tenths Earth normal, Ehlert systematically shut town every piece of apparatus on board—power, lighting, heat, communicators and location fixers—which might, for all he knew, give off radiation which could be traced. Then he returned to the pilot chair and sat gazing gloomily out into the darkness.

This was a hell of a situation to find himself in.

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To start with, he had no idea where he was. He had dodged and doubled over so much of the galaxy in the last three days, trying to shake off the obstinate Patrol ship that had followed him in and out of hyperspace like a greyhound after a rabbit, that he had lost his bearings a full hundred parsecs back. In his haste to take advantage of the fact that the blue blip on his detectors was for once conspicuously absent, he had had time to give no more specific orders to his locators than simply to set him down on the nearest habitable world. From the way he floated on the inflated cushions of his padded chair, that much seemed to have been achieved. Now, like it or not (he didn't like it), he was going to have to spend approximately the next two years on this ball of mud.

Or at least the time it took for the long but nonetheless fallible memory of the Patrolman piloting that pursuing barge to become occupied with a more immediate problem.

Not that he was afraid of the Patrol, of course. It was just that it would be unhealthy to seek their company at the moment, if he could avoid it. There was a small matter of a ton and a half of narcotics in his after hold, which was legitimate cargo in itself, but which unfortunately was present under the wrong circumstances. It had somehow got aboard without receiving the stamp of approval of the customs and excise department on Walter's World, his last port of call. Moreover, the Patrol might be tempted to enquire whether there was a receipt for the duty payable on it in his ship's log book—said duty being a tidy sum in the region of twenty thousand kilocredits. He did not possess such a document.

Come to think of it, Ehlert would have been slightly more surprised than that persistent Patrolman if he *did* have a customs receipt. He had long ago decided that all government taxes of that nature were an unwarrantable infringement of the liberty of the individual, and he had rather got out of the habit of paying them. His career had been exceedingly profitable in consequence, and he did not have any idea as to how it could be continued from the depths of an Imperial jail.

He realised that for the past day he had been much too busy to bother with eating, and unwrapped a block of pilot's rations. Biting off a lump of the stuff, he conceded that from some points of view he had just jailed himself quite as effectively as the Patrol could have.

The gooey, bland flavour of the rations upset him, as always, and he had to force himself to swallow. Though an incredibly small amount of them would sustain him for a couple of days, he could see himself starving to death because his supplies nauseated him if by some mischance the locators had interpreted his directions too loosely. Theoretically, they should have picked a planet which offered breathe-

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able air and chlorophyll vegetation as well as the bare requirement of gravity, but he couldn't be sure.

He sighed and put down the bar of rations. Taking down the equipment he wanted from the rack along the wall, he set about the laborious business of computing his position manually. He did not dare feed power to the locators, with the Patrol barge in the vicinity. Anyway, it would have taken him a full three hours to prime the circuits again once he had drained the power from them. Shutting off the delicate mechanism of the computers was roughly equivalent to hitting a man over the head with a blackjack; it did not cause permanent damage, but it disturbed the functions of the circuits and made them thoroughly unreliable for some time afterwards.

Squinting up through the transpex, he guessed at the name of the brightest visible star and checked its signature off against the calibrations on the dial of the spectrometer. After fifteen minutes of laborious

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calculation, he remembered that he had forgotten to allow for the atmospheric absorption characteristics of the world he was on. Swearing, he went to the tester and ran the standard series of assays for composition. The task took him about a thousand times as long as the machines needed, but at length it was done, and he was pleased to find it proved breathable. It was high in helium and slightly on the dry side, but that would not bother him.

Checking the spectrum again with corrections, he found that he had guessed wrong. He hit the right one on his third try, thus proving that he could really navigate about the galaxy by the seat of his spacesuit, as he had often claimed to impressionable women, and came up with the nine-nines probability that he was in Galactic Sector 49-51-32. If he had had the presence of mind to set the meters while he was landing, he could have taken the spectrum of the primary, but he had no idea how fast this world rotated, and he might as well find out at once if he had unwittingly dumped himself on a member planet of the Empire. If this melancholy possibility was realised, he might wake up in the morning to find the Patrol waiting outside the airlock and licking its collective chops like a bear at a beehive. Still, he knew it was reddish, and off-hand he couldn't recall any red-sun worlds in this sector.

He performed the complicated inversions necessary to identify two other suns and turned the nine-nines into ten-ninths, which was heartening.

At length he took the cumbersome three-dimensional map which he never used from choice, set it in the middle of the floor, and let it go. He scratched his chin as he retreated into a cubbyhole to allow the eastern side to straighten out. The map was ten years old, and the first thing he had to do was shut it up again in order to collect his slide-rule and scribbling pad from the flying desk and make the necessary adjustments for galactic drift and mutual relative motion. Crouched in the alcove which was not required by the map's expansive personality, he found his foot caught underneath it. At that stage he seriously considered re-priming the locators, on the off-chance that the Patrol barge wasn't within range, but he weighed the time expended in the two alternatives and came up with a quarter hour balance in favour of the slow method.

He peered into the depths of the map, which was self-illuminating. It covered so much of the galaxy that its scale was appallingly small, and for a while he thought he was going to have to shut it up *again* in order to collect his magnifiers, but in the end he managed by squinting horribly to discover that he was most likely on a world revolving around a main-sequence star which was ringed on the map as Category J.

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He wrote down the particulars and thankfully shut the map up and stowed it in the inch-wide slot which was all the space it took when folded. Someone, he reflected, was going to make a fortune out of a map which could be partially unfolded, instead of blowing up to full size at a touch. Then he remembered that someone had made a fortune already out of the locator, which all sane people used instead of a map, and realised that he was going to go on being cramped every time he had to forego power. He was reaching for the next slot, the one holding the Starman's Bible—officially, *The Imperial Gazetteer of the Charted Universe*—when he remembered that a Gategory J star was listed only as a menace to navigation. It was not an Imperial dominion, and therefore could be described succinctly as uncivilised.

Which meant that there would be no reference to it in *that* volume. Which meant that most people would have been stumped right away. Which meant that Johann Gustav Ehlert was a cut above most people, since he wasn't stumped. He had known *that* for a long time. Chuckling, he turned to the rear of the cabin, his helmet light—the only other self-powered illumination beside the map on board—making a circle of brilliance on the bulkheads which bounced over irregularities like a jumping bean.

A flash of bright red lit up the whole interior of the cabin.

He jumped, and in doing so turned completely round in the air, landing facing the transpex ports, fully expecting to see the tail jets of a Patrol barge outlined overhead and its muzzles glowing from the warning shot they had just fired to advise him not to get up in a hurry. Instead, there was nothing. There was not even the shriek of rapidly-divided air which was the signature tune of a spacecraft working atmosphere.

Wondering what he had stumbled into, and having horrible visions of landing in the lap of a volcano, even though a planet building mountains was by definition not Terra-type, he went to the port—ridiculously on tip-toe—and looked out. He could see nothing to account for that sudden flash.

Then something occulted a star overhead, and he breathed a sigh of relief which almost made the ship shudder on her landing jacks. Of course. A moon very close to its primary, and so exactly in the plane of the equator that it was eclipsed on rising.

A string of ideas chased themselves through his mind. Visions of violent tides were replaced by memories of Roche's Limit, followed by, "I was lucky I missed that on my way in!" After that he decided that with a primary this massive the moon would be about the size of Phobos, and he assigned to it an exceptionally high albedo.

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Wiping his forehead with the back of his hand, and determinedly dismissing the picture of a Patrol barge throwing atomic shells at him, he returned to the rear of the cabin. Here there were two large bins, into which he threw all the loose items he wasn't going to need during his occasional bouts of free fall. He unclipped the lid of the first bin, and began by flinging into the disposer two dozen empty bottles of various shapes sizes and colours which had once contained the native alcoholic distillations of as many different worlds. He had finished the tally when he recalled that the disposer used power, and he had none. He swore again and filed the need to take them out again for future reference.

As he got lower in the bin, he was digging further and further into his hectic past. Every now and then he reached something which made him stop: either because the object merited retention after all, such as a complete set of the cumbersome plastic badges used as identity papers on Cha-Da-Pa-Za, where literacy was a criminal offence, or—more often—because he had to scratch his head in deciding what it was. A scrap of cloth bore an attractive, woven-in perfume; he had hunted for the rest of it for thirty seconds before he remembered that he held the whole of it in his hand. It has been a costume worn by a girl he picked up on Dvarno. He had kept it, meaning to measure its area to settle a bet with a friend who had never been there—the girl had been quite as happy without it as with it, and *much* more amenable.

He threw it away sternly and went on searching.

It was in the other bin, after all that, that he turned up what he wanted. Triumphantly holding it in one hand and dusting it off with the other, he returned to his seat.

It was not an item included in the standard equipment of a civil spacecraft. It bore the imposing title *Handbook of Inhabited Non-Imperial Worlds*, and was eight hundred and seventy pages thick. He had found it while going over the wreck of a Patrol barge which had unaccountably bumped into an asteroid while overhauling him to make a search, and had quietly appropriated it instead of including it in the inventory of salvaged items with which he was supporting his claim for an Imperial reward. It had annoyed the Patrol immensely, having to pay out to a smuggler.

Oddly enough, he had never had to use it before. Though the Imperials would have been annoyed to find that a civil pilot knew just how many planets the Empire did *not* count among its possessions, they had a hard time holding on to what they did have, and Ehlert's most successful business was carried on on planets of the frontier to which they laid claim without being able to enforce their laws as

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effectively as they wished. Now, though, the weighty tome was going to repay his care in lugging it thousands of parsecs.

He riffled through it, making the necessary adjustment for galactic drift again, and found his own location. The helmet light was ill-adapted for reading, but this world rated three lines of close-set abbreviations and symbols. It was called Baucis Alpha III, apparently, and the code annotations said . . . They said . . .

He began to chuckle as he consulted the explanatory table of signs. By the time he finished, he was laughing aloud.

He shut the book and tossed it aside, making it land with a thump on the floor. If he had planned it deliberately, he couldn't have chosen a better refuge. To start with, it was human-inhabited. The symbol CZ meant that it was colonised during the great exodus from Zarathustra when that lamented star went nova two hundred years before. Their society was degenerate of course, but they would speak a corrupt version of Galactic which he would understand with a little trouble. And best of all, it wasn't slated for Patrol survey again till fifteen years from now.

If the ex-Zaratnustrans—or rather, their descendants—could live here, *he* could. And to a regressing people with legends about star travel, an off-worlder might be a hero ! He would probably spend a very pleasant holiday !

When the sun came up ten and a half hours after going down, he made a final check to ascertain that he was where he thought he was, and he was. Then he chewed slowly through what he hoped would be the last meal of pilot's rations he suffered in a long time, expended most of the energy from it in pushing chunks of the local soil up against the hull of the ship—a bone-cracking task, for though his degrav kit greased the passage of the lumps with six inches of air between them and the ground, their inertia remained untouched—and collected the equipment that he would be likely to need. He had only the haziest idea of how this degenerate culture would regard him, but with the aid of the degrav, his communicator, and a blaster, he reckoned he might at least set up in business as a minor deity. He topped off his camouflage work with an artistic arrangement of some singularly ugly local vegetation. The purpose behind that was not so much an urge to keep within as many laws as he could—though the penalties were stiff for introducing advanced technological devices into a backward society—as a deep-rooted fear that some local medicine man might think it a house of spirits and have it knocked down.

Casting a final glance at the result of his handiwork, and deciding that no one could possibly stumble across the vessel by accident, Ehlert hefted his pack and went whistling out across the sandy plain in search of human habitation.

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He struck a well-defined track less than five miles away, which bore vehicle ruts and the prints of some five-clawed animal repeated in both directions. So the inhabitants hadn't regressed as far as all that. They retained the wheel, and therefore presumably the art of wood or metal working. But the animal spoor indicated they had gone back to draft-horses, or their local equivalent, which was not unusual. In the panicky flight from Zarathustra, few of the evacuation ships had carried more than a cargo of humanity and the bare essentials of life. None of them were known to have established a civilisation at the old level when they found refuge.

Tossing a mental coin, and finding it come down heads, Ehlert turned left or south along the road, and had walked for an hour when there was a rumbling on the trail behind him. He turned to find an unsprung four-wheeled wagon approaching him, laden with some live animals under a tight-stretched net. Between the shafts was a fearsome-looking creature whose ancestors might have included a cow, a rhinoceros, three assorted lizards and a gorilla. It was bright purple, and progressed down the road on two clawed hind feet which made the marks he had noticed, and balanced itself fore and aft with a tail which got in the way of the traces and a single short foreleg growing out of what would have been its chest if it had been a Terra-type mammal. That was the one thing it obviously wasn't.

Behind this opium-dream an old man with a dried brown face sat on a narrow and un-padded bench, who hauled vigorously on the reins and brought his wagon to a halt opposite Ehlert. He jerked his head at the seat beside him, evidently offering a lift.

A sudden enraged squeal from one of the pink and green beasts confined under the net saved Ehlert the trouble of replying verbally. Nodding his thanks, he climbed up on the hard bench, and the driver let fly with an enormous knob-headeded club, catching the purple beast at the base of its tail. It shook itself, and incidentally the wagon, and resumed its half-running, half-loping gait down the trail.

The old man said nothing for almost twenty minutes, as long as it took his cargo to quieten down. When the squeals had become a subdued moaning, he spat some brown concoction he had been chewing into a patch of greenery at the side of the road, and eyed Ehlert. The latter had been awaiting this moment with some trepidation.

At length the driver uttered a word which might have been construed as, " Stranger ?"

Ehlert nodded.

" Where from ?"

Copying the accent as well as he could, Ehlert answered, " Back there."

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" Ah," said the driver, and fell silent again. Ehlert dredged in his memory for the autohypnotics he had used when he first took to space, to counter free-fall effects. The wagon was definitely unsprung, and the jolting was making his stomach complain.

The old man roused himself again a mile further on. " You'll be from that ship that landed last night," he suggested.

Untangling his meaning from the overlying distortions, Ehlert kissed good bye to his dreams of godhood. He added a short passage of hurt comment regarding the compiler of the *Handbook of Inhabited Non-Imperial Worlds*, and comforted himself with the reflection that at least the old man had spoken quite matter-of-factly. They didn't mind spacemen, apparently. He would get by on this world, even if it meant he would have to work for his living during his stay. The idea made him even queasier.

Finally he settled for a nod. The driver favoured him with a searching stare, and went back to concentrating on his reins. After a while they passed into wooded country, and then rounded a bend which brought them in sight of their destination—presumably. It was a town of sorts. Not too primitive,either. It was walled, with undressed stone, and seemed to be about five or six miles in diameter. A river, bridged with a passable span of stone, ran between it and the road on which the wagon approached it. It was dressed overall as if for a festival; branches of greenery were nailed up at the gate towards which they were jolting; gay coloured streamers of cloth were slung on poles to form an arch over the track, and mingled with the smoke rising over the houses he could see an occasional hot-air balloon of gaudy brightness.

He imitated the other's accent as well as he could to inquire, " Is there some sort of celebration ?"

The driver nodded. " Kurens pick a king at this time," he said. " Why else d'you think I'd come all this way with my krognits ?" He gestured at the pink and green beasts behind him, and they burst out squealing.

" You're not from here yourself ?" hazarded Ehlert.

" Not I ! Silly idea, I calls it." The old man broke off to negotiate the tricky bend into the bridge, and exchanged what seemed to be a string of insults with the driver of another wagon also trying to use the bridge. Ehlert sniffed as they drew closer to the town. Apparently plumbing had not been among the remembered skills the ex-Zarathustrans had been able to recover.

As they entered the town itself, it was plain that the population were really getting set for something. Arches of greenery bridged the narrow streets; not a house was without some sort of flag or pennant, with

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usually a bunch of repulsively-coloured flowers nailed over the door. He grinned, thinking that it might almost have been in honour of his arrival if he had come by some other means than a farm cart. Then he noticed something which made him stare searchingly and in astonishment at the passers-by. Nobody among the hundreds they met wore an expression of gaiety to match the flags and streamers, except for a group of children squatting around a bonfire at a street-corner, filling and releasing hot-air balloons such as those he had noticed from the road.

Wondering at this unrelieved gloom, he turned to his companion. "Why is everyone so sad?" he demanded.

The old man had found a fresh plug of his chewing material. He said around it, with a contemptuous inflection, "Maybe they can't find a king."

"Huh?"

"They can't find a king. Barbarous idea, kings. We Grulboths don't muck about with that sort of"—the last word made Ehlert turn bright red, but he supposed it was only natural to find such metaphors in this sort of society. With difficulty he withdrew his eyes from the fascinating spectacle of a very pretty girl kilting her skirt up about her knees in order to jump a puddle four feet broad, and began to chortle mentally, and to rub imaginary hands. This might be better than being a god.

Gods sometimes had to set examples, and that, after all, could be restricting.

He inquired diffidently, "Is this job—uh—open to anyone?"

The driver guided his monstrous purple animal round a sharp corner and into a large open square, which looked from the stalls around it to be a market. There were perhaps three of four hundred people there, buying and selling the typical primitive goods of the locality—cloth, wood and metal implements, and food. No one was talking above a whisper, and their faces were all melancholy.

"I believe it is," said the driver, reining in his beast, which immediately sat back on its hind legs and let out an ear-splitting wail like a spaceship opening up all tubes in atmosphere. Ehlert winced, but no one else seemed to notice it.

"This is where you get off," the old man added, getting down himself.

Obediently, Ehlert complied. "Where would one—uh—apply for the job?" he went on.

For some reason the question seemed to amuse the old man. He chortled till the tears came to his eyes. "I tell you, I don't hold with such truck," he managed to say at last. "But you could try asking a priest, I suppose."

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" A priest ?"

" I reckon so. Look, yonder comes one now." He pointed, and Ehlert followed his finger to see a tall man in what were obviously ceremonial robes of some kind wearing a tall steeple-crowned hat and bearing a staff of office, enter the square. People who had already been talking in low voices changed to a whisper, and drew aside to let the prelate pass. Ehlert noticed that he looked worried—plainly because of the difficulty of finding a king—and eyed all the people he met searchingly.

" Thanks," he said, turning back. But the old man had already vanished.

His mind filling rapidly with dreams of glory, he set his shoulders back and made his way across the market to approach the priest. He had to look up to meet the man's gaze, which annoyed him.

" Yes ?" said the priest off-handedly.

" Are you looking for a king ?" said Ehlert hopefully, not really believing that the old man could have been serious.

But the words seemed to wipe the haggard look from the other's face like a wet sponge taking writing off a slate. He nodded vigorously, and the tall hat threatened to fall off.

" Are there—uh—any special requirements ?" Ehlert pursued. " Not," he added hastily, " that I don't think I could comply with them all. But I'd just like to know."

A great light seemed to break in on the tall man. " Of course !" he exclaimed. " You're a foreigner. Perhaps from space ?"

Ehlert nodded. He did not quite understand this casual acceptance of space travel by a people who didn't even have internal combustion engines, but he was prepared to go along with it.

" You're exactly the sort of person we're looking for !" said the priest with enthusiasm. " Do you really want to be our king ?" He sounded as if he could not believe Ehlert would say yes.

Interpreting this as doubt regarding the likelihood of someone as glorious and great as a spaceman condescending to notice these mud-dwellers, Ehlert affected a properly disdainful and condescending tone in his answer. He said, " Well, I only just got here. I'd like to know something about the office, naturally."

" I'll answer all your questions," said the priest eagerly. Ehlert noticed that a ring of listeners had collected about them, and distinctly heard one fat old good-wife say to her friend, " Man from space—wants to be king !" and her friend answer, " Whoopee !" or words to that effect.

" What does the king have to do ?" he said.

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"Why, nothing, of course. We do things for him. During his reign he is all-powerful."

"No strings attached?" said Ehlert in disbelief.

"Why should there be? You, being from space, are quite perfect for the kingship. Doubtless you will teach us many new and amusing things. We offer all the trappings of royalty—we have everything to gain by accepting you!"

I'll say you have, thought Ehlert. Not his to question the logic of this strange and casual procedure. If being from space fitted him to be their king, so much the better. It looked as if his stay here was going to be just about perfect. Aloud, he said airily, "Well, I think I'll take the job."

At the words, a hoot of joy went up from the nearest by-standers. The news went across the market-place like a breeze across standing corn, and everywhere grins of delight greeted it. Amid loud shouts of acclaim, he heard the priest cry, "To the palace with him!" Strong hands lifted him off his feet, and he was chaired on the shoulders of the crowd into the main street. Men and women flocked to acclaim him. The mob turned into a procession, and priests in red and blue robes joined it, leading it down the decorated roadway towards a large stone building facing a square with fountains and flowerbeds in it.

"Your palace!" shouted the priest he had first met from somewhere near his right foot. "*Your* palace!"

Ehlert would never have dreamed of showing it, but the sight of it fulfilled his wildest expectations.

Someone raised a keening sort of song, presumably meant to express joy, though it sounded like a tired bull-frog in its death agony, and the sound brought more of the red and blue shapes of priests running from the palace. At the foot of a broad stone stairway leading up to the front door, Ehlert was deposited on the ground before a grey-haired and smiling man in golden robes, who bowed sweepingly at his arrival.

"Greetings!" he said. "I am Kabam, your right hand. Approximately, your chief minister. Is it really true that you are to be king?"

Ehlert nodded, and Kabam beamed till all his white teeth were visible. "Enter, then!" he said. "Let me show you your possessions!"

The next hours passed in a dizzy whirl. Touring the lavish building to which he had so suddenly fallen heir, Ehlert maintained his dignity for all except one moment, even though he was actually amazed at the white marble, the hand-carved furniture, and the rich draperies. Hunting through his vague memory of primitive Earth, he judged

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that these people were at about the level of Ancient Egypt, or Byzantium. He had thought of Twentieth Century Hollywood at first, and then remembered that they had had machines.

His one lapse from dignity was when Kabam threw back a carved door and made a gesture of display. "Behold!" he said.

Ehlert took one step forward and stopped. Through a dry throat, he managed to ejaculate, "Are—all—these—?"

"Of course!" said Kabam. "They are to do whatever you want them to do. *Whatever*. Aren't you, ladies?"

"Of course!" echoed the baker's dozen of singularly well-shaped and under-dressed girls who reclined around a pool in the middle of the room like some historical script writer's idea of Ancient Baghdad in a B teleshow.

Now Ehlert *knew* he was going to like being king.

Then Kabam offered to take him to his apartments and dress him in his royal graments. Ehlert liked the look of the costume he was offered, but he sniffed it suspiciously. No sanitation. Well, might as well begin introducing up-to-date ideas right away, he thought. Let these people—Kurens, that was it—see that he was going to be a good ruler.

"Take these away and wash them," he commanded. "And send me a large bowl of hot water and some soap, and also the best metalworkers and braziers and potters you have."

"Soap?" said Kabam blankly. "What is that?"

I might have known it, thought Ehlert sourly. If I'm going to educate them, I'll have to start with basics.

He explained soap, and it was provided—not good, but workable. To the puzzled and smiling braziers and metalsmiths who attended his pleasure later, he gave a sketch plan of a system to connect the royal apartments to the well sunk beside the river which supplied water. He had to draw a pump for them, too, and they departed chattering.

That was enough reform for one day, he thought.

It turned out that his first kingly duty was to declare the beginning of a month of celebration and preside at a feast in his honour. Then he had to take part in a procession through the streets, amid cheers of his subjects. He didn't mind either of those—they were balm to the ego. But by the time he had finished his tour in the unsprung chariot which served as a royal coach, he needed balm elsewhere. He ordered the palace carpenter to fit springs to the vehicle. The man laughed and obeyed.

And then it was night. He *enjoyed* that.

He was very careful not to press his power too far, in case he offended anyone, but the success of his plumbing turned his mind to other things.

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Electric lighting would be next, he decided, and under his eagle eye some very surprised men found themselves erecting vast and primitive batteries in the cellars. He got a glass-blower to fake up some carbon-filament bulbs, and they lit all right, although their life expectancy was minimal.

He often caught an expression of long-suffering tolerance on Kabam's face. Plainly, this was not the way a king was supposed to act. Well, they'd appreciate the benefits of his knowledge later, maybe, but right now he ought perhaps to check where he had gone wrong.

He taxed Kabam with it directly.

"It is not the custom during the month of rejoicing," said that worthy firmly, "for men to *work*. These tasks to which you have set your staff are not amusing—not entertaining!"

"Oh, they have plenty of time for merry-making," said Ehlert. "After all, the whole town's at it all day and night." Indeed, the Kurens really seemed to have let themselves go; feasting, singing and dancing in the streets, love-making, fighting—the lot. A new code of law and order was high on his agenda.

He caught himself and grinned. An old smuggler thinking of law and order!

"To hell with them!" he finished. "I'm doing these things for my own comfort at the moment. After all, who's the king? *I* am, damn it!"

He was indeed, and Kabam, though he obviously disapproved, had to admit it.

In the end, Ehlert compromised by enjoying himself as much as he could in the Kuren manner, though he was often dragged back to reality with a bump by the absence of some major luxury such as shaving lotion. The ladies, though—they were a *great* help.

Oh, lovely, lovely! Ehlert thought lazily, late on the thirtieth night of his reign. He was sitting alone in the empty throne room, eating a succulent local fruit and watching the city make the most of its final night of rejoicing beyond the windows. He had turned out all but one of his electric lights and the dim glow of the remaining one lit the inside of a flagon of wine with a ruby radiance. To be king for no reason, except that he had come from space; to have a city full of people at his beck and call, admiring his knowledge of such comforts as mechanical transport—he had only that afternoon approved a plan for an electric cart to replace the old animal-drawn chariot. These Kurens learnt quickly, he gave them that, though they did not seem as excited as they ought to be about the new devices he was giving them.

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Then there was gunpowder—more complex explosives would follow later. And the scientific planning of farms, and so on, and so on.

He roused himself out of a hazy dream of immortalisation in stone, the statue to be approved by himself and erected in the square under his balcony here, to go and look at the actual square.

Throwing wide the doors, he strode out on to the balcony and leaned over the balustrade. At once there were footsteps behind him, and the ring of metal. He turned in astonishment.

"Where d'you think you're going?" said someone.

It was one of the guard of honour who watched the palace at night. During the month of rejoicing, all formal subservience was suspended—masters could not order slaves, and not even the king could demand to be addressed as anything but an equal.

"What is this?" he demanded, forcing belligerency into his voice.

The soldier hesitated. When he spoke again, there was a ring of admiration in his voice. He sheathed his sword and replied, "You know, maybe you do mean to stick it out after all. Most of 'em quit at the end of the month. Still, if I were you, I shouldn't crowd your luck. One of the other guards might be a little more hasty on the draw than I am."

In a friendly and confidential manner, he added, "If I were you, chum, I'd go back and make the most of those girls they give you, *I* would."

Bewildered, Ehlert looked down into the square. Just at that moment the flash of the rising moon glared red across the pools and lawns, and he saw it glint on the weapons and armour of another squad of guards. So *that* was the fly in the ointment. Once you'd accepted the kingship, you weren't allowed to resign. That complicated things, but only a little. Since he meant to stay about two years, anyway, he would have plenty of time to work out his plan of escape.

He bade the soldier good night, made a mental note to see that he didn't presume when the last night of the period of freedom was over, and went back inside.

He was awoken at crack of dawn the next morning by the sound of tearing metal and breaking stone in the room next door—the one he had converted into a bathroom. Since he had ordered no new work there, he got out of bed—it was useless to think of sleep with that racket going on—and went to see what was happening.

A team of masons and metalsmiths were very busy pulling out all the plumbing he had had put in with so much care.

"What the devil—?" he began. Then, furiously, "Stop! Stop! Put it back at once! I'll have you—"

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What did they do on this world when they wanted to award a serious punishment? He registered a mental note to ask Kabam.

The foreman brazier carefully put a piece of his laboriously-designed pump in a portable forge to be rendered down to crude metal. Looking meaningly at one of his mates, he tapped his forehead and went on wrecking the set-up.

Incoherent with rage, he stormed out of his apartment in search of Kabam. On the way, his eye was caught by a movement in the courtyard. Surely not—

But they were. They were dragging his electric batteries out of the cellar and loading them on to a disreputable-looking old dust cart. Even as he watched, the carpenter came out and added what he recognised as the springs of the royal chariot to the refuse.

He found Kabam eating a leisurely breakfast in his own room and spluttered out his story, adding, "Why don't you stand up when I come in, too? The month of rejoicing is over! Show proper respect!"

Kabam licked his fingers delicately. Forks were yet another of Ehlert's planned reforms. "But of course the festival is over," said the right hand. "Today we return to our ordinary way of life. Naturally the commands of the king must be forgotten. After all, your reign is over, you know."

He stood up, beaming. "Really, you have given us some excellent sport, one way and another. These mechanical devices! They will provide the story-tellers and singers with material for mirth these next ten years. After this, other festivals will seem dull and uninspired."

From the depths of a body suddenly icy cold, Ehlert whispered, "What did you say about my reign being over?"

"Why, naturally," yawned Kabam. "The king rules for the month of rejoicing, when there is no law. Tonight, of course, you will be killed."

Ehlert needed no second telling. His security was one thing, but his life was another. He ran.

Panting and gasping, Ehlert stumbled across the smooth ground. He was almost at the end of his endurance now, and behind him the yells of the enraged Kurens grew closer and louder. It had taken the priests a long time to rouse the citizens from their lethargy—the month of rejoicing had made them lazy—but though he had had some start, the gap was closing rapidly. Now the wagons, drawn by the clumsy but swift purple beasts, were on his trail, and men with swords and ropes rode their bucking, unsprung platforms. He had no wish to feel either rope or sword.

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Wildly he looked about him for the ship he had so hopefully abandoned a month before. Was it in that clump of bushes, or that one? Was that really a mound among those green and smelly plants, or just a mass of tangled stalks? Whether the Patrol barge was still up there looking for him or not, Ehlert was going to get out—fast.

A horrible realisation crept slowly over him. He had envisaged being able to search for the vessel at leisure, not have to find it instantly to save himself from a painful and probably prolonged death. His camouflage was too good. He simply could not find it!

He made his decision sickly, but in a flash. As the Kurens' shouting grew even closer, he dived for a shadowed hollow and pulled a clump of shrubs over himself. Then he activated the communicator which he had originally brought along to support his first intention of becoming a minor god. Throwing aside his last atom of pride, he whispered prayerfully into the mike.

"Come in, come in! ICQ, ICQ! Is anybody there?

"*Help*!"

The pilot of the Patrol barge—whose name was Jeffers—had bat ears and a thick black moustache, but Ehlert had never seen anyone quite so handsome or good or beautiful. Later, from the inside of an Imperial jail, he might revise the opinion, but now he was just weak with relief. He had never thought he would be glad to see the Patrol, but the most wonderful sight he could ever remember was that of the barge dropping to a perfect landing a hundred yards from him and lifting him almost out of the hands of the Kurens.

Jeffers, who had been listening to an expurgated version of Ehlert's story, in which no mention was made of the ton and a half of narcotics, and an unaccountable failure of power had unexpectedly appeared, shrugged and tapped ash off a smoke-stick. "I wish you get-rich-quick types would take a little more trouble over the messes you get into. I'm forever having to hoist people like you out of crisises they could avoid by reading ten minutes' sociology."

"You mean they *always* kill their kings?" said Ehlert hazily. "But in the name of space, *what did I do*?"

"Mister," said Jeffers ruminatively, "you walked into a trap that was baited and loaded for bear. Don't you realise that we have a *reason* for counting Baucis Alpha III as a Category J system? Hell, can you picture a fertility-worship culture fitting into the Empire? I can't.

"The Kurens have not just *a* common, but *the* commonest, primitive culture. Actually, it's not quite so primitive—the most primitive ones kill their real king. The more sophisticated ones declare a period of

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lawlessness and set up a mock king. It's all very simple. In the period of licence, the society expresses its hatred of authority, and they have a king of misrule. By killing the king of mis-rule, when the period is over, they express their recognition that authority and law and order are necessary after all. They have to kill the king, but by killing the mock king they prove they—"

Ehlert held up a hand. "My head's going round and round," he said plaintively. "I'll take your word for it. You mean it happens elsewhere?"

"All over," said Jeffers. "Go and read some history. Find out about Saturnalia, and Christmas, and things like that."

"I will," promised Ehlert fervently.

Jeffers stubbed his smoke-stick and turned to the control board. "Where do you want to be dropped?" he asked.

"Dropped?"

"That's what I said." Jeffers looked melancholy. "I'm not going to jail you, if that's what you're thinking. You broke about umpteen laws regarding the contagion of backward planets in spirit, but not in letter. Right now, the Kurens are having a great time wrecking all your innovations. They're destroying the evidence for you." He eyed Ehlert speculatively, and a note of guarded optimism crept into his voice. "You don't have any other reason for getting jugged, do you?" he added. "I was chasing a feller in this region a while back—"

"It can't have been me," said Ehlert, donning his most saintly expression. A great joy was rising in him. The other evidence wasn't destroyed, but at least it was under several tons of earth on the surface of a planet which was not scheduled for Patrol inspection for another fifteen years. Waiting for him to collect it at leisure.

He smiled very sweetly. "You can drop me anywhere convenient to yourself, officer," he said. Then, remembering, he amended, "That is, anywhere but Walter's World. I—found the place a little dull."

"Okay," shrugged Jeffers, punching the controls.

Ehlert lay back and stretched luxuriously. Johann Gustav was doing very nicely, thank you. Of course, if some of his friends could see him riding home in one of the Patrol's latest barges, they might be almost as surprised as he was to be doing it. He closed his eyes and began to picture their astonishment. Kingship had its points—

*Sharp ones.*

*John Brunner.*

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*In modern science fiction little thought has been given by authors to the food and drink essential to spaceship crews in the early days of space flight although in the technical field many suggestions and experiments have been offered. As Mr. Newman points out, there is one staple food which is a vital necessity— and can be easily taken on such voyages.*

# SPACESHIP DIET

## By John Newman

The days when scientific writers envisaged crews of spaceships casually popping a couple of pills into their mouths and feeling as though they had eaten a four-course meal are numbered. We now know that roughage is vitally necessary to the human body. But, for space travel, can we provide both roughage and nourishment in a compact, light and preservable form ?

For a simple answer to what appears a complex problem we can do no better than go back to the Stone Age.

Food taken along by spacemen aboard the early rockets will have to conform to certain obligations imposed by the laws of astronautics and it is illuminating to study the degrees of success recorded by typical modern foods when subjected to the test of spaceship-worthiness. The first and most important rule is that the food must give value for weight. With designers eyeing askance every single extra gramme of mass designed into the ship, their reactions to tinned food are plain.

The type of tinned food now on sale, although it might have made all the difference in 1812, has no place in the future of space travel. The container alone is far too heavy for the amount of net weight, and, as yet, we can see no method of utilising the waste weight of metal as

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reaction mass in the rocket drive. Most tinned foods contain a large proportion of water that is uselessly stored there until the can is opened and the water put into the recycling and reclamation system of the ship. The self-heating type of can—although admirable for shivering soldiers in slit-trenches—is even more earthbound in conception. In the closed-universe existence of the spaceship an extravagance of the order of carrying along a separate heating unit for each can would be senseless. Chemical fuelled rockets just cannot afford to drag along all this useless weight.

As an example of weight that cannot be used for long periods take the lowly potato. Here is an excellent basic foodstuff which consists principally of water—water which is locked up in the same way as the more syrupy liquid in cans.

It is evident that dry foods must be used. The water in the ship's recycling system will then be used only as needed and a significant saving of weight will be effected.

Reconstituted foods, as we can well remember from the days of the last war, are not at all satisfactory when they make up the major part of the diet for any extended period. The first spaceships will probably have long periods of weightlessness whilst they coast along between the planets and, during these periods of several months, the crews, eating under conditions of no-gravity, will need solid or semi-solid food and the minimum quantity of difficult-to-prepare liquid foods. Boiling will be impossible without elaborate centrifugal equipment and frying in free-fall conjures up exotic pictures of globules of hot fat floating around the cramped living quarters of the ship.

So we have a picture of a crew spacing off, to look forward to a diet of reconstituted food. Psychologically, to keep up the morale of the crew under abnormal conditions, it is essential that their food should contain at least one item that they would normally eat on Earth.

The one common factor in the diet of most Caucásian peoples—the one foodstuff that we have eaten regularly since the Stone Age—is bread.

For thousands of years bread has in itself been the symbol of food. The baking of it is one of the most ancient of Man's arts, dating back to the Stone Age in Switzerland and, later, in Egypt, when barley and wheat were ground between hard stone surfaces to give flour for bread making.

It should be easily possible to eat bread under the cramped conditions of no-gravity aboard a spaceship, and the few crumbs could simply be separated from the air by the filters without their becoming clogged up. Even these days, any ship at sea for more than a week or two has

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facilities for baking bread and the ship's cook is often judged by the quality of the loaves or rolls he bakes. In France the baker is one of the more important citizens of the small towns and villages.

It is necessary that the crew of a spaceship have a well balanced diet, containing all the trace elements, vitamins and energy and cell building constituents that are obtained from a variety of foods. This is one of the strongest reasons for including bread in the diet of future spacemen, for bread contains a pretty well balanced mixture of most of the vital food factors.

Analysis shows that bread contains on the average 48% carbohydrates, mainly in the form of starch, that is burnt in the muscles to carbon dioxide and water after the glucose transformation. There is also 38% water and 9.5% protein, the latter being used in the body to repair and replace damaged or worn out tissue. There are eight amino acids in protein that are essential to human nutrition and they must be present in the correct proportions. One of them, lysine, is often lacking in wheat flour but it has now been produced synthetically and only 0.2% added to flour increases the available protein by about 90%. The fats amount to 2% as does the percentage of inorganic materials such as calcium, phosphorus and iron, all of which are required in small amounts by the human body. The vitamins present include thiamin, riboflavin and carotene, the latter being broken in the liver to give vitamin A.

The problem of feeding the crew is complicated by the necessity for storing food either in a pressurized locker under the same air pressure as the rest of the ship or exposed to the vacuum of space. Here there may well be an extension of the airlock built on to form a larder, a point that does not appear to have been dealt with in scientific literature of space-travel. Any packing or protective wrapping must be closely scrutinised in the light of weight-efficiency ratios; remember the example of the metal cans.

Food exposed to space will not be very cold unless the rocket is well beyond the orbit of Mars and any water will soon evaporate from it to leave it completely dehydrated. So it is best to start with a material that is as water free as possible.

Wheat flour fulfills this need admirably as, even without special drying, it contains only about 14% water and in practice this could be considerably lowered without affecting either value or flavour. Flour needs no special containers to waste mass, it can be packed in ultra-lightweight cotton or porous plastic bags weighing less than a hundredth of their contents.

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It does not matter whether the flour is carried in an evacuated part of the ship or in the cabin. Packed in plastic bags it would be odourless and non-toxic. For convenience in handling under conditions of no gravity it could be packed in small plastic bags containing just enough to be used at one time so that it would not have to be exposed to the air whilst still powdery and liable to drift.

When baking time comes round, one of these bags would be brought from the storeroom and the other ingredients necessary for the bread dough would be injected into the bag and the whole mixed inside without exposing it to the air. The old saying ' untouched by human hand ' would fit in here, too !

In the most advanced of Man's machines, the spaceship, men will use the oldest art of cooking to prepare his daily bread, a method which has changed little in millenia. The dough can be made to rise using either self-raising flour or by the addition of yeast. Yeast—the best system—is a plant that needs sugar, nitrogenous material and mineral salts, all contained in flour, to grow. The yeast can be kept for long periods whilst dry, when it must be mixed with sugar and water to activate it before being mixed with the flour.

The flour bag is produced, sugar, fat, salt and yeast added, or they may be already mixed and only water needed to start the ' working ' of the mixture. The whole is mixed in the bag until doughy and then brought out and allowed to rise in a warm place—the cabin of the ship would be quite warm enough.

And here is where dough really scores over other forms of food preparation. The gluten makes it sticky and elastic, so that it can be very simply handled under conditions of free fall. You want the dough on the table surface ? Very well, just put it there—and it will stick ! The ideal property when liquids globule and float all over the place and solids have to be held down.

The yeast lives on the added sugar, and the sugar produced by an enzyme in the flour acting on the starch, and produces carbon dioxide. The gluten makes the dough elastic so that it can trap the bubbles of carbon dioxide and expand. When the dough has reached three times its original size it is gently kneaded. This kneading is actually a folding movement in which the dough is stretched and folded inwards. However difficult this may sound, the fact that the dough stays in the place you put it vastly helps matters. Imagine cracking an egg in free fall !

The dough is placed in a tin and allowed to rise to double its size. This rising is actually an expansion and has nothing to do with gravity, present or absent, although bread made in the absence of gravity should be ' lighter ' than any we know.

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Further reasons for preferring bread as a staple diet on interplanetary travel include the fact that it can be made with the simplest of equipment and has a wonderful mouth-watering aroma whilst rising and baking. Who has not felt the pangs of hunger, even with most jaded appetite, when passing a bakery whilst the baking of bread is in progress ? This is likely to be an important factor when men are cramped up together for long periods of comparative physical idleness. It may well be vital that they should be forced, or enticed, into eating—it is insidiously easy to fall into the habit of not eating enough. The preparation of bread would come to be looked upon as a red-letter occasion, as a link with home, as a marker in the progress of events.

The bread could be cooked in a lightweight electric oven or, more quickly, in a high frequency heater combined with infra-red lamps to brown the outside and form the crust. The bread-making tins should clip into the oven to hold them into position.

All this time, no doubt, the crew off duty are waiting around for the moment when it is cooked. Bread when cold is one of the most easily digested of foods; but that is not true when it is newly baked and hot. It is interesting to consider that many of the crew may suffer from indigestion soon afterwards, just as they did as children after sneaking fresh-baked bread or cakes from their mother's ovens.

It is doubtful whether bread will be baked every day, although a rather more frequent baking than once a week might be necessary. The time sequence might depend on the amount of water obtainable from the ship's recycling system. Power should present no problem with solar batteries is use. Although bread will keep in spaceship conditions for a week and remain quite fresh, psychological reasons indicate a more frequent baking day.

Bread will not be carried ready baked from the start to the end of the journey for the obvious reasons that water locked in the bread is not available for the cycle in the vessel, deterioration by molds not needing oxygen can occur and it cannot be stored in a vacuum unless in an airtight container.

For the liquid side of the personnel diet, plastic type squeeze containers of polythene would seem to be indicated. It will be difficult to make tea, which requires boiling water.

To relieve the diet as much as possible, milk powder could be added to the flour making the finished product more nutritious than ordinary bread. Under zero gravity, when men are prone to space sickness, it is necessary that the food should be easily digested and milk bread is even more easily digested than ordinary bread whilst bread made with whole meal flour contains more roughage in the form of bran to help elimination from the body.

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Spaghetti, oddly enough, would be an ideal food to eat in a spaceship but it might be difficult to prepare. It is very similar to flour in storage requirements, being mainly flour. Fears that spacemen would baulk at trying their hands at cooking can easily be proved unfounded by the enthusiasm with which many men will tackle the preparation of a meal—and the fact that most chefs are men.

Combined with an air-conditioning system using algae with a high protein content to remove carbon dioxide and to provide food, bread would give all the necessary calory intake and components for a well balanced diet.

Bread, in whatever final form it may end, will most certainly be eaten wherever mankind steps among the stars, an undying link from our remote ancestors, through us, to our galactic descendents.

And—with the current furore about the dissipating qualities of helium in spaceships' atmospheres—a good lump of dough handy might save the lives of all aboard if a meteor drilled the hull !

*John Newman.*

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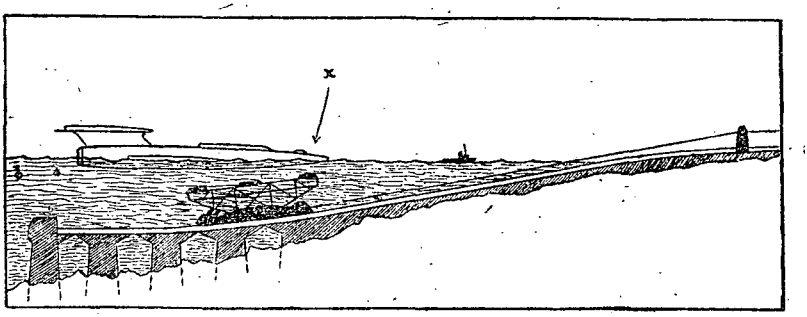
# THIS MONTH'S COVER

Readers will remember artist Bradshaw's cover on the August issue depicting a stratosphere commercial rocket on its launching cradle prior to take-off.

This month we show the culmination of such a flight with the rocket arriving at its destination by landing in the sea. The sketch below shows the launching cradle under the water waiting to receive the rocket after all passengers have disembarked. The rocket is then towed over the cradle by tugs and secured and then winched out of the water where it is unhitched and the cradle together with the rocket makes its way along the ten to fifteen miles of track back to the passenger embarkation point shown in our previous cover.

Marker buoys in the sea indicate the rocket's position to contact the cradle when it is under the water.

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# PLAYTHING

Illustrated by HUNTER

*The vastness of space will present many enigmatic problems to man's questing mind. One of the most popular used by many writers is that of finding an alien uninhabited spaceship, with all that it implies. Despite the mundane theme, author Bulmer presents an extremely fresh approach.*

**By Kenneth Bulmer**

The storm raged among the stars. It had a life of its own which, born out of clashing electro-magnetic fluctuations around the Simmonds sector, drove its blind path across a wedge of the galaxy until, for no apparent reason, it dissipated and vanished. It was not a particularly important storm—only one star went nova—and the various intelli-

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gences nearby with the slightest interest merely logged its progress and made the necessary entries on their spatial weather maps. During its brief life the storm swept up the inevitable interstellar bric-a-brac, tumbling it along like autumn leaves in the wind.

And, almost as an afterthought, it took a gusty sideswipe at one insignificant speck of that bric-a-brac.

Which, as Lieutenant (Astrogation) Gordon Watts said to his skipper, was what they deserved for poking their unwanted noses into this God forsaken corner of the galaxy.

The only answer to a remark of that nature was the cryptic, carefully controlled quirk of the lips that Commander Bill Bryant had patiently developed on this scout to impress the crew with his own omnipotence and, as a by-product of that, to boost his own morale. It might be a good sedative to his First Lieutenant's barely concealed panic.

Instead, he said: " We were ordered to make this scout, Mr. Watts. So, we make it. So, we get caught in a storm and get ourselves lost."

" Very lost," Lieutenant Watts said feelingly.

" It's up to us, as officers of the ship, to pull the chestnuts out of the fire. The crew are still happy. We've got to find our way back to the task force."

" Hum," Watts said. Then, changing the subject in a way which told Commander Bryant that his astrogator had ideas on the subject of finding their way back, Watts said: " I'd like to think that that Paint didn't come through the shake-up."

" He's disappeared, at any rate." Bryant rose from his command chair. He had discussed the next move with his first lieutenant in such a free way that he was now in dread lest Watts should think that Bryant was turning to him in need. Bill Bryant's lips made their usual struggle to keep from quirking. He couldn't afford to let anyone of the crew—not anyone, including Gordon Watts—think that he was unsure of himself, a trifle overburdened with the cares and details of his first command. He'd carry through with the rigid Navy discipline that had taken him in at eleven years, processed and moulded him, mind and body and spirit, and at twenty-four thrown him halfway across the galaxy in a frail metal shell. He'd fight himself because of Navy tradition and discipline. And he never even thought that he might be missing something in life.

Because of that desire to appear the iron-bound imperturbable captain that he knew he wasn't, he said: " Get an all stations check. I want the ship one hundred percent."

" Aye aye, sir." Gordon Watts knew when to jump.

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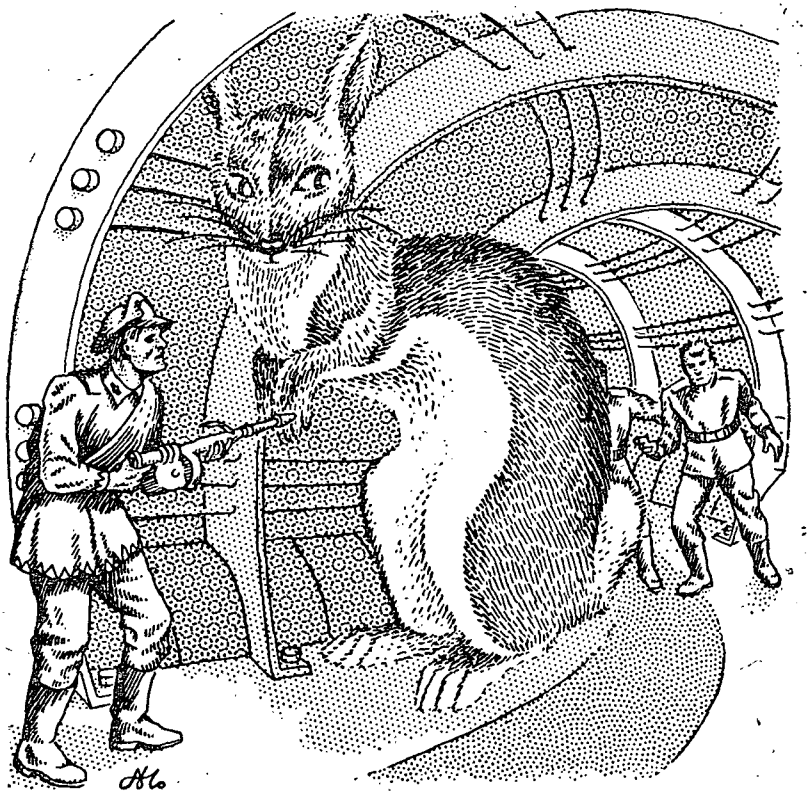

Lights flamed up on the command board as sub-sections reported in. Engine. Guns. Air. Art-grav. Communications.

" Communications report delay in establishing full operations, sir." Bryant could see that as well as Watts from the tell-tale lights. But he had ordered the check. He had to abide by his own decision. And all the time, riding him like an ulcer, was the nagging worry of finding his way back to the task force. He closed his mind abruptly to the shocking thought of what Admiral Don Juan Refugio de la Starza would have to say to a Commander who got lost in a spatial storm.

" Check," he said. He was about to remind Watts that the astrogator's own department hadn't checked, when the overhead came down and struck him behind the ears. Dizzily he clawed up against the leg of the command chair, which, in some crazy fashion was leaning

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over above him. It took him ten seconds to realise that art-grav had blown. It only took him one to realise that his reflexes were hideously slow.

Then he was drifting across the darkened cabin in free-fall, trying feverishly to sort out his next move.

Orange emergency lighting came on. Watts was upside down—relatively speaking—and trying to fan himself back to his control post with ineffectual little dabs of his hands. That little quirk dimpled in the sides of Bryant's mouth. Then he drew his brows down in a frown and shouted: "Mr. Watts, you know orders. You should be strapped in your chair on duty."

Watts went red. "Aye aye, sir." That was all he could say. Naval discipline gave the keyword and reply to almost any situation. Bryant caught a stanchion, hauled himself crabwise down to the command chair and strapped in. He didn't look up at Watts.

He needn't have bothered. The red alarm glowed and, whilst there was enough air for it, the siren wailed. Nobody stopped around waiting for it to whisper into silence. That meant the ship was holed seriously enough in that compartment to kill you if you didn't jump. Bryant enveloped himself in his suit and had time to nudge Watts over towards the second's suit.

After that they got their breath back on canned suit air. Reports came in on the suits' radio. The ship was a dead duck. Some time later Bryant had to admit, even to himself, that he wasn't going to take this ship back to the task force.

And that left him exactly where? He was young in years, even if he was old in Navy discipline and service. He had under his command —which meant that he was absolutely responsible for—forty-five men, many of them older than himself. Those men looked to him to get them out of trouble. Some of them were really still civilians, dragged from their homes by the lure of space, thrust into a uniform, given some intensive training and then pitchforked out into the cruel emptiness of space.

The thought of all those dumbly appealing sets of eyes turned on him made him uncomfortable. That it was in his imagination made the itchy feeling no less intensive.

"Tech Johnson reports art-grav totally inoperative, sir." Lieutenant Watts' voice was calm. Then as though echoing the uncertainty milling in Bryant's mind, he said:

"Orders, sir?"

Commander Bill Bryant swallowed. He closed his lips tightly, forcing his mind to work. If this had been some old-time ship sailing the seas of a planet, he could have ordered jury masts rigged and spread

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some coat of sail, made a laborious landfall. As it was, they were stranded somewhere between the stars, with billions of miles separating them from any sort of land at all. And, even then, that land might be violently hostile to human forms of life. What orders could he give?

The feeling of forty-five pairs of eyes looking at him, clouding with doubt, then flaming in sneering contempt of his inadequateness, growing wild with horror at their inevitable fate because he was incapable, drove him into speaking.

"Cut down air intake," he said harshly. "Minimum subsistence level. Engines, stand by for orders. Now, Number One, what sort of course can you lay me off?"

Which was only partially passing the buck. Watts had to dig up some sort of course, then Bryant could check it against the optimum curve. A single screen still glowed greenly in the darkness beyond the edge of the orange emergencies and Bryant saw on the screen the frighteningly unfamiliar lamps of space arranged in constellations that for all he knew, had never been seen before by men of Earth.

Watts began to speak; but Bryant ignored him. He was looking at the screen, his mouth half open and his lower lip caught sharply between his teeth. Onto the screen edged the needle shape of a space ship. When Bryant had assured himself that he was not suffering from delusions, that a ship really was there, springing miraculously from the womb of space, he allowed the reaction to shake him for three seconds.

Then, under his dynamic direction, the ship exploded into a ferment of activity. The 45mm energy weapons swivelled in their turret to cover the stranger. Men, wearing their impeding spacesuits, closed up to action stations. Every nerve in every body was tensed and waiting, watching the stranger and ready, at Commander Bryant's order, to flame into action.

The strange spaceship remained quiet, drifting lazily on a parallel course, dark, enigmatic and completely alien.

When it seemed as though human endurance could not stand another milli-second of waiting, Bryant made the only decision left to him. He ordered away a boarding party.

That party reported back incredible news. The alien ship was devoid of life—all the compartments to which they had been able to gain access had been empty. There was air in her. Her locks had been shut: but had opened easily under manual operation. She was a drifting mystery ship, empty, lifeless—and holding out the promise of landfall for the stranded Earth crew. Feeling as though he was acting under a compulsion that had pre-ordained every move he had

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made, Bryant gave orders for the transference of everything of value and of all personnel from the Terran scout to the alien.

He didn't have time in the short hop across from one ship to the other to take any heed of the awful grandeur of deep space flaming around him. The cartwheeling star motion gave him only the sense of being an infinitesimal speck in the cosmic ocean. He didn't even have time to be frightened. Not that he would have allowed to Archangel Gabriel that he could be frightened—not after his years in space and his service.

The alien ship cut off the stars before him, her hull frosted with the glitter of distant fires. A jagged edge of metal alongside the lock caught one reflection and sent it back hard and undistorted by atmosphere. Automatically looking at it, Bryant saw the roughly engineered mechanism and locking of the valve. The metal work looked unfinished, almost crude in its simple barbarity. It was totally unlike the high-precision machined Terran workmanship in his ship.

Going through the ship up to the control room, his natural eyrie, he was struck by the unbelievable crudity of this alien ship's construction. Everywhere he looked, seemingly, he saw fresh evidences of unfinished work, jagged edges in place of planed surfaces, casually bent tabs with clumsy rivets to hold doors and bulkheads in place.

"Somebody was in a hurry with this crate," Watts was saying to P.O. Sharkey as Bryant came through into the control toom. "I know she's an alien: that accounts for the odd controls and left-handed get-up of her technology. But this, this—" Watts waved a helpless hand round the cabin. Bryant held his cool, calculating, 'trust-in-me-boy' smile.

"We'll discuss any peculiarities there may be in this ship later, if you please, Mr. Watts. Right now you'd be better employed getting a working knowledge of the ship."

"Aye aye, sir." Watts disappeared in the direction of the engines. Assuming, Bryant corrected himself, that the engines here were where any sane Earthman would expect engines to be. At once, calling upon his dwindling reserves of energy, he was deluged with queries, requests for orders, decisions to make, all the hundred and one things that a ship's captain must take in his stride and deal with without a second thought. He was feeling deadly tired now—the strain of taking his ship through the storm, then the crack-up, and now the business of putting an alien ship into working Terran condition took a heavy toll on nervous energy. He felt the beginnings of a twitch developing in his eyelids. He had to ignore himself. His crew and the ship came first.

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The men from Earth worked hard. They sealed the alien. They got the engines working. They fathomed out the system which gave them air and refrigeration or heat, gave them the means to see into space with vision and radar. They were not very surprised that this mystery ship employed techniques familiar to Terran scientists—after all, electricity has to be handled in certain ways. Methods of application were the great stumbling block, but at the end of a period of hazy concentration and the passing of hours of intense effort, Bryant knew that he was again a captain in charge of a ship capable of taking him back to the task force.

Obstinately, the realisation did not cheer him. He was aware of the furtive, almost underhand looks the men were giving the ship. He heard the muttered comment. As when Signalman Ling-Tsao, looking disgustedly at an object which purported to be a radio, said: " A radio! Tubes the size of jam-jars spread all over a chassis the size of a billiard table ! Wires partially attached with chunks of solder like billiard balls. I tell you, my revered ancestors would—"

" I've no doubt they would," Bryant cut in sharply. " But have you got that set working yet ?"

" It is working, sir." Ling Tsao bent hurriedly over the rig. Bryant checked his grim smile and went aft to Engines.

What he found there gave him the spaceman's willies.

Artificer Rombaud, his brown face running sweat, looked up with a puzzled grin.

" This set up is strictly for morons, sir." Bryant nodded. In some strange fashion, Rombaud had insinuated himself into a position of familiarity with him during the scout. Just how it had happened, Bryant couldn't have said. He condoned it. He wouldn't admit that it gave him pleasure that there was one man aboard who could think of the Commander as a human being. That would have been a sign of weakness.

" Are the engines working, Rombaud ? Can we Drive ?"

" We can, sir." Rombaud wiped an oily arm across his face. The oil was no browner than his skin. " The people who built this must be all thumbs. They obviously have a high technology: they build spaceships. But the construction is—well, casual. Look at this. A coil wound with such heavy wire that it buckles and overlaps on the winding. Leads in three-inch thick metal, soldered down with a pancake of goo that destroys a good half of its efficiency. If we had tools, we could turn this ship into a real fighting unit—" Rombaud's eyes gleamed.

" Just so that we get the ship running. Back with the task force the high-forehead boys can have all the fun they like taking her insides to pieces."

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Rombaud cocked his head sideways. He began to wipe his oily hands very carefully. He said: " Any idea who built her, sir ?"

Bryant did not reply at once. He had known ever since the ship crept onto the screen that this was a ship of no race ever before contacted by men. They had bumped into another of the cultures sprawling amid the stars. It wasn't too important—but important enough to make him bust everything getting back to report to Admiral Starza. The interstellar set-up was balanced very finely. The Palladians were winning the war hands down. The entrance of another race on the stage meant that an ally might be found. Bryant knew very well that if the new race allied with Pallas, one person would be held responsible.

However unfair that might be, he knew it was inevitable. It was just another plum in a captain's cake.

He had to get this ship back to Admiral Starza and dump the responsibility on shoulders more used to these moves of high policy. Rombaud was looking at him quizically. Behind the Artificer's head an electric bulb the size of a football emitted a cheerful yellow glow. Nothing, apparently, on this ship was made on the small scale. The aliens liked to do things in the big way.

" How do the engines compare with standard Terran Space Navy Mark Ten's, Rombaud ?"

" Pretty good, sir. Surprisingly enough I'd say they were even more efficient than ours. Hard to tell until they are in use."

" We'll soon find out, then." Bryant turned to peer over the far side of the engine-room. He caught his foot on a projecting bolthead and almost fell. Regaining his balance he looked down at the bolt. The hexagonal head was standard enough. But the bolt was a good foot across and nine inches high.

" What's that holding ?" he rasped, annoyed at appearing undignified

Rombaud grinned quite unashamedly.

" They're all over the place, sir. Probably only holding the deck to a beam. Like to make sure that things stay together, these aliens, I'd say."

" Whoever they are," Bryant said, obliquely answering Rombaud's previous query, " as engineers they'd make good asteroid dredgers."

" They've got the know-how, sir." Rombaud said carefully—you didn't disagree with the captain lightly—" it's just the clumsy way they put their knowledge into use. Frameworks held into place by simply bending a tag of metal over to grip—no attempt to clean anything up. There are raw edges everywhere. Two of my men have had to be patched up already, sir."

" Um," said Commander Bryant. He looked round the engine-room, nodded, said: " Carry on then, Rombaud," and went out.

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The ship was a real mystery. A spaceship, constructed by simply throwing sheets of metal together. Clumsy, inefficient equipment, made more inefficient simply because of its construction. But everywhere evidence of an advanced technology. Perhaps this was the logical outcome of the dearth of skilled labour as a civilisation swung over from the manually efficient to the mechanistic technology? Earth had been threatened with that problem—in the twentieth century craftsmen had declined with the dying out of precision workmanship under the impact of machine tools. Then, when they had wanted men to fabricate the first rockets there had been no pool of skilled labour to call on. The anomaly had arisen of white-haired oldsters with the skill still in their fingers working on the latest of late products from the brains of men looking to the future. Bryant shrugged. Whatever that problem was, he had the more pressing problem of getting this ship and his crew safely back to the task force.

He passed a tall, blocky, solid looking box standing at the side of the corridor. He remembered noticing others scattered at strategic points about the ship. This one attracted his attention because there were bright chisel marks around the jamb of the door. He stopped to inspect it.

"Can't get it open, sir." Watts was standing there, his face unreadable. Bryant straightened up.

"Any idea what it is?"

"None, sir. The metal is tremendously thick. And it's machined into far closer limits than anything else." Watts' natural revulsion as an astrogator at crude equipment boiled over. "The charts are nonexistent," he said. "There are no astrogating instruments. The optical sights are just a laugh, they're almost plain glass. The radar is little better than a sham. Vision is so coarse that you can almost see each individual line and dot." He was breathing heavily.

"You'd better get our equipment across then."

"I've already ordered that, sir."

"Good. At least, the air plant is functioning well. The engines will go, Rombaud says. Would you mind checking guns, Mr. Watts?"

"Aye aye, sir."

When Watts had gone, Bryant walked tiredly towards the control room. His mind was trying to grapple with the problems heaped upon him. The central fact remained, he had to report this crazy set-up to Admiral Starza. What that crusty old officer would say set the quirk dimpling in Bryant's lips.

He had the hands piped to dinner—or whatever name they felt like giving to the meal—and then, thrusting out of his head the overriding worry harassing him, he carried out a final all-stations check.

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Guns reported that the turrets worked fine, only there were no weapons. He had decided against bringing across the Terran guns—there was not enough time. Air and food were both running short, and from Watts' calculations, based as they were on a supposition regarding their position, he knew that to get back safely would be a very near thing.

With that knowledge in his mind, he gave the order to start engines.

Watching the comically over-sized gauges, with their needles giving the appearance of having been stamped solid out of sheet metal, Bryant followed in his mind the sequence of operations being carried out down in the control room. Rombaud would have the men on tip-toe. He most certainly wouldn't relish the results of a failure or a blow-out—with Commander Bryant ready to breath down his neck.

The engines filled the ship with a steady thrum, the same familiar vibration that was a concomitant of all life aboard ships between the stars. It was like walking on millions of tiny insects all buzzing their wings beneath your feet.

"All steady, sir." Watts' voice carried a hint of the beginnings of hysteria. Bryant glanced at him quickly.

The first lieutenant was sitting in his own control chair that had been brought over, watching the set-up of his instruments and screens that had been fairly slung into position aboard this alien craft. Reassured, Bryant looked back to his own board. This was alien. Like the chair in which he was sitting.

All the chair consisted of was a curved piece of metal three inches thick rising from the deck, with a flange bent over and down. On the flange was a twelve inch thick piece of foam rubber with four large and uncomfortable bolts holding it down. Bryant had had the bolts unscrewed—they had, inevitably, left-hand threads—and sat now in some degree of comfort. His lips quirked at the spectacle he must make, hunched up in the chair, with his feet sprawled inelegantly before him. But—the command chair gave a first rate view of the controls.

He had no time then to wonder any further about the mentality of aliens who, with advanced technology of the order to put a ship into interstellar space, bungled around with amateurish engineering. His thoughts about where the aliens who had manned this ship had gone vanished, driven away like smoke before the howl of anguish that blurted from the wall-speaker.

Words gobbled from the speaker.

"Get it off! Get it off!"

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The noise built up into a din that bounced in solid waves from the oversize speaker. Tensely, waiting for a report, Bryant found a sick apprehension in him. What had gone wrong now?

"Control! Tech Ellis here, sir." The words from the speaker were wild. "A—a monster, sir. Jumped on Blakely—near killed him, sir."

Bryant smothered the curse that flew to his lips even as he shouted over his shoulder: "Carry on here, Mr. Watts," and went running down into the bowels of the ship.

He cared nothing, now for his precious dignity. Some of his men were in danger, they had talked about a 'monster.' His place was with them, finding out what it was all about.

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He came into the long corridor leading down to the engine room to find a knot of men, their navy overalls a welcome patch of blue against the omnipresent yellow paint of the ship, huddled over the moaning form of Blakely.

At his rapped out questions, Tech Ellis straightened up, his face white and nostrils pinched.

"A monster, sir," he repeated stubbornly.

"What sort of monster?" Bryant was tired and worried. Talk of monsters could do grisly things to the morale of the crew. Especially if the monsters didn't exist.

"A big animal, sir. All furry, with great eyes and floppy ears. Broke Blakely's arm, sir. Near trod him to death."

"All right." Bryant's mind went at this fresh problem even whilst another part was still mulling over the other problems he still had on hand. "Doctor Wemyss is looking after Blakely now. The rest of you men, keep in pairs. Scout round the corridors. Keep in visual touch. Report anything strange—that is, anything to do with this so-called monster. Move!"

"Aye aye, sir." The hands moved off, obviously not relishing what lay before them. Bryant had deliberately refrained from asking further questions. He didn't want to hold a post-mortem now on what had happened. He didn't even know how many men beside Ellis had seen the monster. Getting the men moving at once, without time to think was a sound psychological step. They'd had no time to think through to what might really be around.

After all, it was an *alien* ship.

And the men had their hand weapons. From the looks on the techs' faces, Bryant knew that those guns would be used. His mind fretted over that. It was impossible to carry on a fighting unit of the Navy with strange monsters running loose—and yet those monsters might be the aliens who owned this ship. The question of why they hadn't shown up before this hardly occupied Bryant's mind. Anything in an alien repertoire of curiosities could explain that.

He began to walk slowly after Tech Ellis. Rounding a corner past one of the enigmatic boxes he saw a tableau before him which brought him up sharp, a gasp forcing its way past suddenly stiff lips.

Ellis and the crewman with him were creeping silently and remorselessly upon a —well—upon a monster.

There was no other word to describe adequately the furred body that bulked as large as a horse, with long, flopping ears twitching slowly this way and that. Great hairs sprouted from the face, which, being turned away from Bryant, gave him no opportunity of seeing the eyes

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which he knew, from what Ellis had said, must be gleaming in that alien face.

The hind legs were bunched under the creature, and he could see the dark sheen of blood on the hair. That blood must be Blakely's. Bryant compressed his lips. He slid his handgun out and began to walk very quietly up the passage.

The animal was uneasy. A stump of tail wagged erratically. Then, still looking away from the three Terrans, it began to back towards them. Its feet made sharp scraping sounds on the metal. Ellis and his companion halted.

" Come back here," Bryant whispered. The two Earthmen started, then they turned and began to creep back towards their commander. Bryant waited. In him there was a strange, inexplicable reluctance to shoot. Especially in the back. Especially when he didn't even know the first thing about his enemy—if this strange monster was an enemy.

The tableau endured for perhaps four heartbeats. Then, with a convulsive bound that was hurried in its unexpectedness, the animal leaped into the air, writhing over backwards, to land on leaping feet. It sailed completely over the two crewmen—Bryant heard its fur like sandpaper rasping against the metal overhead—then it crashed onto the deck directly before him.

He stared into its great, liquid eyes. Whiskers sprouting from its prehensile nose quivered, the nose itself coiling and uncoiling like a water-hose. Bryant threw his gun up. In the fractional instant that separated the command from his brain and the pressure of his finger on the trigger he felt a thought so preposterious that he did not fire.

The animal was stricken with fear.

And it was when that was borne in on him that he heard the shocked screams from the two Terrans.

Ellis was reeling backwards. The other man was down. Bestriding him was the sort of obscene monster that could only have welled from the subconscious of a madman. Eyes, feelers, tentacles, all were the product of a diseased mind. Ellis twisted himself and his hand-gun let go a rolling thunder of sound. The bullets sprayed the walls, the deck, the overhead.

Some struck the beast. It whined, on a high, keening note of futile anger. The man on the deck lifted his gun and pumped shots which blended in a staccato tattoo with those from Bryant's weapon. The animal screamed again.

Then it turned and raced away, disappearing into the dim lengths of the ship.

The three Terrans were left with the mass of quivering fur which they had once feared as an alien monster.

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"What was it?" Ellis was shaking all over. The gun in his hand shook.

"See those eyes? And those tentacles?" said his mate.

Bryant took a grip on himself. These men would spread contagious fear throughout the ship. And that was something that he just could not allow.

"Look at this beauty," he said harshly. "D'you see what it is? It's a rabbit."

"A rabbit?" Ellis and his mate gaped foolishly.

"A rabbit. And you call me sir!"

"Aye aye, sir."

"You don't need to be reminded of that, Ellis." Bryant was white himself now. White with reaction and shock and the annoying feeling that the situation was sliding away from him.

"Aye aye, sir."

"Right. Get to your posts. Warn all hands to keep a look out. We'll settle with that other one when we're under weigh. Move!"

They went, scurrying at the whiplash in his voice.

Where had he been going when all this occurred? Nowhere, of course. He had been jerked from the control room by the alarm. It was high time that the ship was sent on her course among the stars. Watts would be sitting up there in the control room, wondering what was going on, wearing his nerves to shreds. He ought, in all conscience, to get back to the first lieutenant as soon as possible, for humane reasons.

And that made his lips quirk again. He went into the control room smiling.

Lieutenant Gordon Watts looked at him with an amazed expression that brought sanity back to Bryant. He hardened his features into those he assumed a tough, tight-lipped captain would habitually wear.

"See that a couple of men get down there and shoo that animal into some safe place," he said. "We have company, it seems, Mr. Watts. An animal like an overgrown rabbit and another one—a rather nasty looking brute that has scuttled off into some lair of its own in the ship."

Watts pulled his face together. He gulped.

"A pity we've no decent intercom on this damned alien tub," Bryant went on, savouring Watts' obvious amazement at his commander. "It's going to be hard to keep in instant communication. The men will have to take the radios out of their suits and double up for now. I can't risk having anyone killed by that—that monster—before we corner it."

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"Aye aye, sir," Watts said feebly.

"Now, Mr. Watts," Bryant said briskly. "Can we get moving?"

"Of course, sir." Watts bent over his charts. He clipped the course co-ordinates under his board. Bryant bent over them. The hopelessness of the situation hit him then. Here he was worrying about odd overgrown animals wandering about this ship, when they were lost among the stars. The big things came first. He bit his lip, then immediately straightened out his lips, cursing himself for showing up so weakly before the crew.

"Attention all hands," he snapped. The crewmen in the cabin were the only ones able to respond to that, until the suit radios had been issued. "Prepare to blast."

After that it was all out of his hands. He was the captain, and his subordinates did the actual manual work. Watts took the ship into overdrive smoothly enough. The terrestrial screen blurred, then steadied to give the usual artificial view of the galaxy from a ship travelling at a speed, relative to that galaxy, above light. He found little to comfort him in the unfamiliar patterns of the stars.

Across from them the alien control board was alive with coloured lights. Many had come on as soon as the engines had been activated, others had sprung into life now that the ship was in overdrive. Bryant watched them, speculating on the beings who had engineered them, and what many of them meant. They had traced the clumsy, sluggish wiring of all the circuits necessary to run the ship. There had been others which they had not had the time to trace. Now, Bryant wondered what function they performed.

"Sir!" Watts' voice was horrified. Bryant looked at him sharply, full of apprehension. Watts was staring at the screen, and from the screen to the computations under his clip. Bryant took a look and at once knew that he was face to face with the biggest problem of them all. They had decided to head the ship due East. relative to the Galactic North. On the screen the stars were in apparent motion all right; but instead of flowing back due West, they were all moving away to the North-East corner of the screen.

"I thought the course was East, Mr. Watts?" As soon as he had said it, Bryant knew that he was wasting his breath. Watts was obviously mystified. And, worse still, his reactions told Bryant that the first lieutenant was nearer to a breakup than Bryant cared to admit. It was a nasty situation.

He had to keep Watts' mind occupied, and away from the mind-shattering implications showing on the screen.

"Mr. Watts! Check your calculations again! On the double!"

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"Aye aye, sir." Watts snapped the reply. Bryant caught the repressed resentment and took relief from it. Watts should be okay for a while.

His next step was not going to be so easy. He ordered overdrive shut off. Then, working twice as hard as any of the crew, he rechecked the wiring, the engines, the controls. They were, as far as the Terrans could tell, functioning perfectly. And all the time the weird lights flickered on the alien board. Those lights began to play on Bryant's nerves. He wanted to know what they were, check their wiring and pull them to pieces. He thought he would like to do that.

He shook his head. God !—he was tired. The suit radios had been issued and now reports on the monster hunt claimed his attention. The insect-like animal—the Killer the men had dubbed it—was still on the loose. The Rabbit had been shepherded docilely into a cabin. A consecutive train of thought from that led Bryant to thinking of food. He realised, with a shock that he could not fully understand, that there was no food aboard the ship. Surely the animals could not be food for the missing alien crew ?

He rejected that idea—emotionally, not intellectually. He had felt sorry for the Rabbit.

The monotonous yellow paint of the interior depressed him. Watts' head was still bent above his computations. Bryant decided that he could risk leaving his second-in-charge here for a short spell. If Watts went psycho on him his problems would become almost insurmountable.

The engine room staff were sitting round playing dice when Bryant came in. Already Rombaud, his brown face a shining halo, had a sizable pile of ship-change before him. Bryant fought down his grin and said: "Watch below, Rombaud ?"

"Aye aye, sir. I've got all entrances guarded against the Killer."

Even as he spoke a suit radio, standing on the floor by his elbow, squawked.

"Spotted the Killer, chief ! Down in the tail—scuttling behind storage tanks."

At once the crewmen boiled out of the door, shouting and brandishing their guns. Bryant watched them go, knowing that nothing could hold them now until they had disposed of the menace. He walked slowly after them. Hell—why *wouldn't* the ship go East ?

When he arrived the men were standing around, sweating and cursing. They had lost the Killer again. The storage tanks, a bilious green instead of the yellow, bulked to one side of the space. On the other rows of empty lockers swung their doors like listless tennis-

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watchers. Bryant cast a casual glance at them, and, suddenly interested, walked across. One locker was closed.

"Ellis," he said sharply, "open this up."

The crew needed no warning. They fanned out as Ellis gingerly lifted the clumsy hatch from its retaining hoop and they held their guns rigidly upon the opening. Nothing with scrabbling legs and raking talons leaped out at them.

There was a slow rumble, then a long cylindrical object rolled out and fell with a clatter to the deck. Thankfully, no-one's gun went off. These spacemen were tough, too, in their own way. Ellis gasped in disbelief.

"A dummy!" he said.

And a dummy it was—a thick representation of a man six foot tall, wearing an alien space helmet and suit, with clumsy leaden boots and a stiff,waxen face. The helmet had shattered under the impact and the face showed clearly, the two eyes, queerly slanted, the nose and mouth, with a chip out of the nose giving a comical grin to the countenance.

"A stiff!" another crewman offered; but Bryant sensed what all the others had felt. This was a statue, however crude and roughly fashioned. Ellis, greatly daring, bent forward and hoisted it upright. It stood up, swaying on its leaden shoes. Someone began to laugh.

The laugh spread. Waves of hysteria beat out—and Bryant fought that damned quirk, clamped his lips shut until the blood flowed away from them and they showed a stark white ring around their grimness.

At last he was able to say: "That's enough! Ellis! Take that dummy up to the control room. Anderson, help him. The rest of you —get back to the engine room. Move!"

"Aye aye, sir." Naval discipline clamped down. They moved off. Bryant was left alone, sweating and shaking. God!—that had been a close shave. The thought of a crew, laughing insanely, in a ship adrift among the stars, obstinately refusing to go where her captain directed —he began to shake again.

That shake was cut off cleanly. He barely heard the slithering scrape, only just caught the sussuration of hair against metal.

He whirled—his gun leaping from its holster and going off of its own accord. The Killer ran straight into that rain of bullets. It squealed, turned to run, and collapsed. It twitched. It screamed. And then it died.

Bryant's hand was devoid of all strength. The gun sagged. He felt sickness rise in him. The heavy rush of feet behind as crewmen attracted by the gunfire, poured back stiffened him. He turned to face Rombaud.

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Rombaud's eyes were shining. He said: "You got him, sir! You killed him—all on your own!" Murmurs came from the clustering, peering crewmen.

Bryant saw actual admiration in their looks—and a perfect well of adoration in Rombaud's liquid eyes. He felt decidedly uncomfortable. He swallowed. The poor monster had run right on to his gun. It hadn't had a chance.

"All on his own," the men were saying to late arrivals. Bryant began to feel like a tri-di comical turn.

"Attention!" he rapped. "Stick this Killer's carcase in store, we'll need to inspect it back at base." Even now he could think of that. "Get back on duty! Otherwise I'll book you all! Move!"

The group broke up, duty men hauling away the repulsive carcase. Bryant pushed through them and strode away to the control room. Watts had just finished his calculations and sullenly pushed the paper back under the clip.

"No difference, sir," he said. "Same co-ordinations as before."

"All right." Bryant took a deep breath, throwing all his mind forward against the next problem. "We'll try again."

The lights were flaring across the alien panels. They irritated Bryant. "P.O. Sharkey," he snapped. "See if you can disconnect some of those damn fairground lights."

"Aye aye, sir." Sharkey moved across to the board.

"Carry on, Mr. Watts, if you please."

"Aye aye, sir," Watts said and activated the Drive.

A feeling of resignation flowed over Bryant. The stars all slipped idiotically away to the North-East.

"Cut!" he said, and winced at the sharpness on his voice. His head was throbbing now, and his stomach was heaving.

He couldn't meet Watts' eyes. He felt that the First Lieutenant would be laughing at him—or pitying him—which would be almost as bad.

What a fine Commander he'd turned out to be. Lost on his first scout, and then unable to drive a ship where he wanted it to go. He felt as though chains were bound round his limbs, and a soaked cord around his forehead.

He moved away from the control boards, clasping his hands behind his back. He walked across to the wall, turned on his heel and walked back. The alien mannikin teetered lopsidedly on its feet, the shattered helmet-ring round the neck throwing back shards of light. Bryant stopped in front of it. He looked it up and down as though inspecting a recruit on his first parade.

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The space suit was what any orderly minded race would turn out for a man with two legs and two arms. But the stitching he saw, was large and irregular. He peered closer. The zippers were mere shams, they could never work. There was bright paint on the face, two red patches on the cheeks and two bright blue dots where the eyes would be. One blue dot was a good inch off the pupil. Bryant's forehead corrugated. The thing reminded him of something.

Where the nose was broken he could see the rough plastic underneath. The nose had been broken before, and had been mended with a lump of plastic which had again broken.

The nagging memory of a familiar object tantalised him. He began to chew his lip, remembered Watts, and smoothed his face out into that imperturbable mask he had so carefully cultivated. Hell—there was a common denominator underlying all the alien artifacts, all the apparently idiotic equipment aboard this ship. He knew there was—there had to be for his own sanity.

He heard a muffled curse from the board and looked up, his concentration broken. P.O. Sharkey was headfirst in an aperture he had opened up in the alien control panel, his navy coveralls rucked up around his thick legs. He backed out, face red and hair disarrayed. He had an object in one hand which, when he had regained the deck and reported to Bryant, added a completely discordant note to the anomalies of the alien ship.

Bryant turned the thing over in his hands. His face reflected the puzzlement he was feeling, until he remembered that Sharkey and Watts were watching him. And Watts would be waiting for orders. Deliberately ignoring that, he went on studying the thing Sharkey had found in the back of the control board. He could see what it was, alien built or not, at first glance. The peculiar solenoid of an energy relay was unmistakeable. But the thing was beautifully made, precision machined and utterly unlike anything else in the ship. It was a true specimen of the culture that could send a ship among the stars.

"There's lots more, sir, behind the board. All working away—clucking like a crateful of hens, sir."

"Very good, P.O." Bryant said absently.

His mind was busy with this new development in the situation. A development which he sensed was far more important than it seemed, outweighing to his inquisitive mind the problem of trying to shift the ship east when she persisted in going south-west.

He hadn't really thought the question out in these terms before; now he realised that he wanted to know *who* was controlling the ship—a panicky feeling in the back of his mind assured him that the Terrans

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were not in command. The Rabbit? The Killer? Not impossible, space knew; but unlikely.

He needed more information. P.O. Sharkey was standing respectfully waiting.

"Get one of those boxes open, P.O." Bryant said waving towards the first of the enigmatic metal cubicles. "I want to know what's inside. Mr. Watts!"

"Aye aye, sir." Sharkey moved off, picking up a Terran wrench.

"Sir?" Watts was standing uneasily before Bryant.

Bryant looked away from the first lieutenant's eyes. Watts needed strengthening, needed the assurance of someone to lean on. Bryant forgot all about his own opinion of his own incapacity; he was busily working out his next step.

"Get that suit off that dummy, if you please, Mr. Watts. I want to look at its hands."

"Aye aye, sir." Watts turned to obey. Bryant was not at all reassured by the first lieutenant's lack of interest in the order. It wasn't natural. From the corridor came bangings and the screech of metal as Sharkey and his men ripped open the box. Bryant walked over.

It was as he had suspected. The box was filled with precision electronic engineering, all busily humming and clicking and flashing. The box was an energy receiver and transmitter—and he guessed that servo-mechanisms were linked to it and its brethren to control the operation of the ship.

"All right," he said. "All right. P.O. take that lot to bits—and then do the same to the rest of the boxes!"

"Aye aye, sir." There was relish in Sharkey's tones.

"Sir!" That was Watts.

"Yes, Mr. Watts?"

"Suit's off, sir. The thing's got six fingers—only they're joined together."

Bryant looked down. As he looked an exultation welled up inside him, and with it a chill fear and a horror of facing the unknown. The dummy's hands were simply pressed from the plastic—'joined together,' Watts had said. Couple that up with the clumsy suit, and the garish painting. He knew now where he had seen something similar before.

"Mr. Watts," he said harshly. "Take a tech crew and check the hull. You'll find an aerial, probably a group. I want them disconnected—don't damage them. Understood?"

"Aye aye, sir." Watts hesitated. Then he said: "You mean apart from the control aerials, sir?"

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" That's right, Mr. Watts. You'll probably find them partially disguised against a fin." Bryant could afford to feel sorry for Watts now. The man was palpably inefficient—at least, when situations arose for which he had not been trained. He could lay off a course well enough. A pity, really. It meant unpleasantness and the breaking in of a new number one. Bryant pushed that problem away to be dealt with as and when it arose at base.

The ship became a place of isolated activity and irksome waiting. Bryant followed with a critical eye the work of Sharkey and his men, and listened apprehensively on a suit radio to the reports coming in from Watts. They'd found the aerials, disguised, and were breaking the connections.

And, as that news came in, the ship leaped under them. Bryant was thrown heavily against a bulkhead. He was looking directly at a box; he could see the livid play of sparks within. He seized a wrench from a crewman, threw it blindly. It hit, flared with intolerable fire, the box went dead, and the ship quietened down like a frightened horse. Bryant was sweating.

It had been a near thing. Whoever was controlling the ship had realised that their control was being cut, and had tried to fling the ship in a last drive—to the South-West !

Bryant filed that information away—he wouldn't forget. Then shakily, he went back to the control room, to be met by a shocked tech.

" Lieutenant Watts, sir. He wasn't hooked on—and when the ship bucked—he—he drifted off."

" Get the screens out !" Bryant shouted, angry. " We can spot him before he goes too far ! Move !"

The tech shook his head.

" It's no good, sir. He had the radio and he hasn't spoken a word. We saw him hit a fin. His helmet fractured."

Bryant swore. He allowed himself to be completely human for once—before the crew—the frustration at losing a man without being able to lift a finger to help tying up his insides in knots. He was breathing heavily. Gradually he got himself under control.

" What are you men hanging about for ?" he said roughly. " Get back to your posts ! We're blasting off, now ! P.O. Sharkey !"

" Sir !"

" Take over Mr. Watts' duties. We're going to take this tin can back to the fleet ! Course is due East. Blast when ready."

" Aye aye, sir." P.O. Sharkey bent over the job which meant a probable step in promotion for him. Bryant recognised his own reaction in anger at the loss of Watts. Just when everything was straigh-

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tened out. Just when he knew the answers to all the problems confronting him. There was a sour taste in his mouth. He forgot all about the almost psycho state Watts had been in; he remembered only that he had lost a serving officer under his command.

That anger, that feeling of bitterness persisted whilst the ship drove through sub-space—drove due East. Watts' calculations had been correct, after all. The estimate of their position they had made had been near enough correct to enable them to blast back into recognisable portions of space again. And all during the journey Bryant hadn't realised what lay in store for him when he rejoined the fleet.

They'd passed a marker scout of the advanced echelon of the Terran Ninth Fleet and had made their identification number. Soon now suspicious escorts would close in. Bryant was glad when Rombaud came up from the engine room on some trivial detail of duty, and detained the man longer than was necessary.

Eventually, Rombaud said: "What was it all about, sir?"

Without admitting to himself that he felt any pride in his showmanship, Bryant picked up one of the valves taken from a box.

"See this, Rombaud? Well made, precision engineered. But see the fine marks of the tools, see the roughened edges, the out of balance thickness of some parts? And, most instructive of all, see that the valve itself is not symmetrical. We can see that at once, even though it is only fractionally askew."

"Aye, sir, that's right." Rombaud was interested.

"Who would make such an object as this?"

"Well—" Rombaud stopped, his brown face baffled.

"People who are very large, Rombaud," Bryant said softly. "A race who are giants. A people who engineer on the large scale. To them this valve is almost microscopic. What would a six-inch man think of a germanium transistor? A huge ungainly chunk of stuff with thick cables in it. Right?"

"Right, sir." Rombaud's mouth closed with a click.

The implications began to sink in.

Rombaud said: "Then that dummy, sir, was a—"

"That's right." Bryant cut in grimly. "A doll."

"And the animals must have been pets. The Rabbit, and the Killer—probably equivalent to a cat, sir."

"Right again." Bryant was boiling with humiliation and shame now. And Rombaud was beginning to see the wider meaning, the ultimate humiliation in store for them. His face lengthened.

"Oh, no, sir! We couldn't!"

"But we have, Rombaud, we have."

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Bryant could see the funny side, all right. But he could also see the side which his strict Naval discipline forced him to see.

" This ship was a model, Rombaud. It was controlled from some far-off star by the giant aliens. It was swept up in the storm that caught us up. Everything about it tells us that."

" But the fleet, sir !" There was a desperate appeal in Rombaud's eyes. His mates on other ships would never forget this.

Bryant squared his shoulders, put back that mask of imperturbable aloofness which he imagined efficient skippers all possessed. He said: " We've captured a child's toy, Rombaud. We'll sail the kid's pretty toy boat through the fleet, and be damned to them !"

*Kenneth Bulmer.*

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# THE LITERARY LINE-UP

Next month produces a powerful line-up of stories all by British authors with the lead novelette, " Lawyer At Large" by E. C. Tubb, dealing specifically with some tricky legal problems of the future in just the setting this author delights in producing. Brian Aldiss returns with a particularly apt story of commercial television taken to its ultimate end in " Panel Game," and John Brunner produces a neat twist in the finding of an alien space ship in " Puzzle For Spacemen."

Francis G. Rayer presents another specialised short in " The Jakandi Moduli " and the fiction is rounded out by Duncan Lamont, another Nova discovery, with " Getaway."

Story rating for No. 38 were :

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | The Way Home - - - - - - | J. T. McIntosh. |
| 2. | Alien - - - - - - - - | Lester del Rey. |
| 3. | See No Evil - - - - - - - | E. C. Tubb. |
| 4. | Fiery Pillar - - - - - - - | K. Houston Brunner |
| 5. | Total Recall - - - - - - - | Kenneth Bulmer. |

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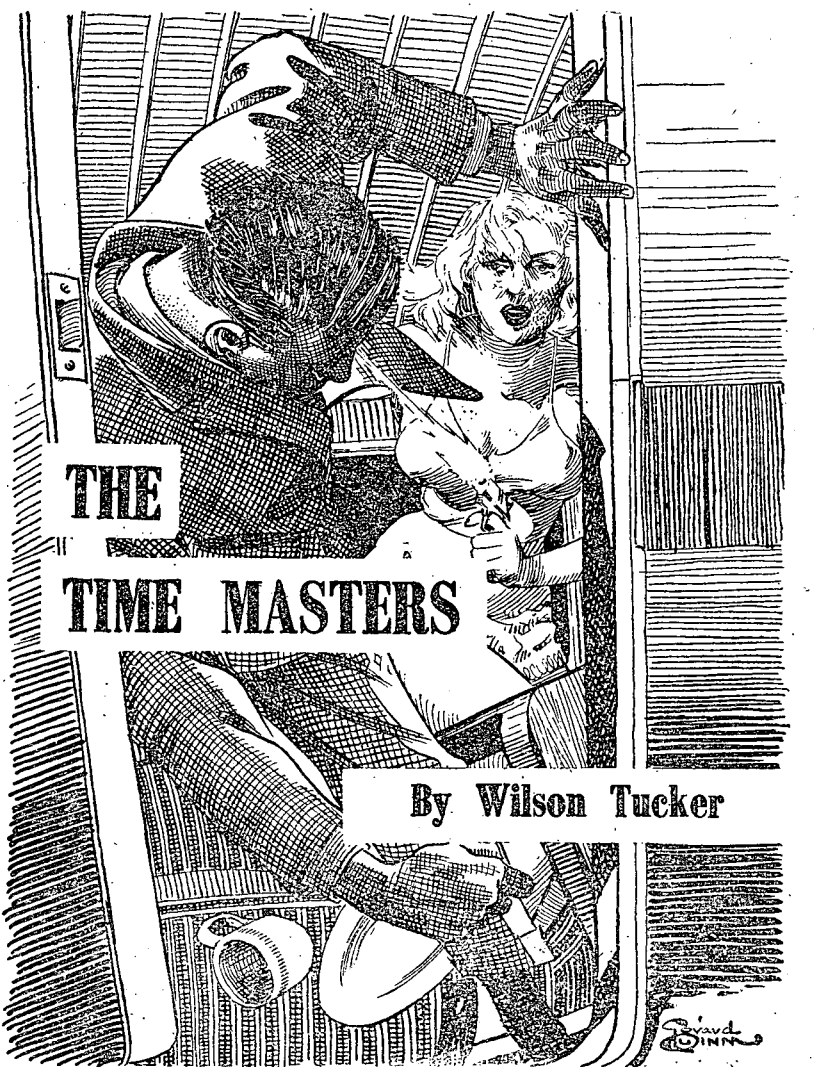


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*The trail of Carolyn Hodgkins is now quite clear for private investigator Gilbert Nash to follow but he knows that when they do meet the chances are that he may lose not only the battle of wits but also his life. Carolyn has become an extremely dangerous woman to have on the Earth.*

Conclusion

## FOREWORD

*To Dikty and Cummings, members of the secret security police working direct from Washington, Gilbert Nash was something of an enigma. His back-trail stopped short in Miami in 1940 and nothing was known about his earlier life. Yet he was apparently in possession of many vital secrets belonging to the nation, added to which there is a certain air of 'foreigness' about him and the fact that he is set up in business as a private detective in Knoxville, Tennessee, only a few miles from the government experimental research laboratories at Oak Ridge.*

*Nash is visited by Gregg Hodgkins an atomic scientist from Oak Ridge and asked to trace his wife Carolyn who has disappeared. Nash elucidates that Carolyn has obtained some vital information regarding experimental rockets or a spaceship from her husband before leaving him and decides to take the case. Hodgkins is unsuccessful in his attempts to buy a gun—whether for protection or violence—and is found late that night apparently murdered by a revolver wound in the head. Dikty discusses with Shirley Hoffman, Cummings' secretary, all the information they have obtained regarding the visit of Hodgkins to Nash's office and the former's death and learns that yet another secret operator has been assigned to their office to help unravel the deepening mystery.*

*Twenty-four hours after Hodgkins' death Nash breaks into the darkened house of the scientist looking for information that might help find Carolyn or solve Hodgkins' murder and is surprised by another intruder, a woman, whom he cannot see in the darkness but with whom he speaks for a while and vows to find again. The following day at Hodgkins' funeral he has no difficulty in identifying Shirley Hoffman by her perfume as the intruder of the previous night and later 'accidentally' has lunch with her, the conversation becoming increasingly abstract as Shirley, working hard for her boss Cummings, tries to discover something new about Nash's back-*

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*ground. Nash however merely hints that some of the mystery surrounding Carolyn Hodgkins may lay in the distant past and concerns a prehistoric man named Gilgamesh who was seeking immortality.*

*Despite police investigation no trace of Carolyn Hodgkins can be found although Dikty turns up the surprising information that she also is a person without a past. Nash, with more information to go on, has reasoned out that Carolyn is working toward a definite goal and that she must be somewhere near one of the few areas where rocket missiles are being tested, probably Los Alamos, but wherever it was she had obviously provided for such an eventuality.*

*The day after his lunch with Shirley, Nash is out shadowing Dikty who is trying to find some evidence that Carolyn has withdrawn money or securities from one of the banks, when he realises that he in turn is being shadowed but cannot trace who it is, except that he is sure it cannot be Shirley. This is proved later when he finds her in the public library trying to find references to Gilgamesh. He invites her back to his apartment for dinner, still aware that he is being followed. After the meal they continue their earlier discussion of Gilgamesh and Nash shows her a collection of rare and ancient etchings which point up the fact that this being could have had some degree of immortality as there are references to him throughout a variety of different eras in early history.*

## XI.

" Gilgamesh was born on an island," he began slowly, choosing his words with care, " an island that he thought was all the universe, all creation, until he left his childhood and began to learn that it was only an island, one among many. When he discovered there were many other islands and ships that plied between them, he decided then and there he wanted to sail in those ships to visit the other islands, wanted to spend his life in such travel. As soon as he had left his childhood behind he began the rigorous training necessary to become a mariner, began to accumulate the knowledge he needed to know to assist in the operation of those ships, began to learn about the other islands.

" And at the same time he learned about himself. He discovered—with quite a shock—that there weren't really very many people on his island, not nearly as many as there were on other islands. In that one respect his island was really unique—the smallness of its population was a thing to be remarked. Eventually he discovered why, and the answer lay in genetics. The life in his world was one of lethal heredity because he, his parents, his relatives and his friends were victims of doubled chromosomes, a quite deadly trait that pared the newborn down to a minimum, permitted only a fantastically low number of

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children to be born with normal bodies. By far the majority of births were stillborn, or mutated monsters that would not or could not live. Perverse genetics in the form of an unbalanced number of chromosomes was the curse upon the island and its people, and none there escaped it. Life very nearly became extinct, would have vanished altogether had not a saving factor appeared in an attempt to balance the scale of nature. Longevity. The only possible answer was an extended life span so that the adults would have an opportunity to overcome the infant mortality rate, to prolong the race as a whole.

"Very few infants lived. Those that did lived a great length of time, to enable them to procreate oftener and longer, to enable them to keep the race alive until a few more could be born to take their places. It was a poor balance, but the best that the tortured natural forces could provide. So it was accepted. Gilgamesh accepted it as had his parents before him, accepted it because he found himself with no *living* brothers and sisters, accepted it because he soon learned how thinly populated the island was. But meanwhile he grew into early manhood, he completed the training necessary to sail, and he married."

Shirley flashed him a startled look.

"He married early because it was the custom and the means of prolonging the race. He married early because it was required of him. Before he made his first voyage he had two children—both stillborn. And then he began a career as a mariner, of sailing between the islands.

"One of the vital things he quickly learned was that life—his life—always hung in a delicate balance. The ships were the stoutest, the best made, yet they were continually running afoul unseen things that wrecked them. Continually striking previously charted objects that did not remain in the positions assigned to them. A ship could founder at any moment, and when the ship went, life went with it because the islands were scattered amazingly far and wide. Too, the food and water on a given island were not always acceptable to life—his life. Food wasn't as much a problem as water, because the water welling up on the island of his birth was not the same as water elsewhere.

"It was a peculiar kind of water, natural enough if one remained on the island during his lifetime, but really quite rare if one visited other islands and discovered how unusual it was. It was a water with certain, special qualities not found in very many other places that the ships visited. Hence, those ships must carry great stores of it to enable them to make complete round-trip voyages without refilling the tanks. The water of the other worlds was drinkable in emergencies—yes, but it was water of a drastically altered nature which failed to yield the mineral qualities necessary to sustain the lengthened life span. It was a poor substitute which, if one were forced to rely on it alone, would

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not sustain life the *natural* span. It was, in short, a thin liquid to prolong life a short while—nothing more. The natural water of the island on which one was born and raised was needed for a healthy life."

The girl had been sitting very quietly, listening to his voice and watching his profile against the flickering firelight. Now she said, "So Gilgamesh became a sailor. Despite the dangers to the mariner, despite the need for the peculiar water of his home world, he became a sailor. And he was shipwrecked."

Nash nodded sombrely, his eyes still following the shadowy patterns on the far wall. "It was one of those dark unseen things that moved in a blacker sea, a chunk of rock that hurtled out of nowhere; it happened in an instant. He was with his wife—standing in their cabin engaged in idle conversation when the alarm bell rang. And in the next instant he was hurled through a breach in the cabin wall, not knowing if his wife had found time to prepare herself."

"Did he . . . did he ever find out?"

"Did, yes. When her body was washed ashore."

Shirley closed her eyes, moved her lips to form the words, "I'm sorry," without actually speaking them. She said nothing aloud, waiting for him to continue.

"So—Gilgamesh hunted water, the kind of water needed for his kind of life. He had his own emergency rations and he took more from the body of his wife; he doled that out a little at a time, sipping at it while he accustomed himself to the new, weaker water he found on the strange island. It did not last forever of course and was soon gone, but he continued his search over all the known world, over all the world that he could manage to cover, always hoping that somewhere he would find it. You see—it was quite inevitable that those ancient Mesopotamian poets should concoct stories about him, should make him out a demigod."

"But he *did* find it somewhere—too late."

"Did, yes. He never found it in its natural state, and so his body began to die—simply began to deteriorate for lack of it the same as your body would deteriorate if you were deprived of water and forced to drink some other fluid. He was so long without it that when a near-substitute finally appeared in an artificial state, complete rejuvenation was impossible. Compare it if you like to the doctor who discovers a serum too late to heal his patient; the serum will prolong the patient's life a while, but nothing more."

"This water is manufac—oh!"

"Yes," Nash repeated dryly, "oh."

"Heavy water?" she questioned.

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" That's the popular name for it. Deuterium oxide. Eventually men began scientific experimentation for purposes of war, and produced heavy water."

" But that was only a short time ago. Twenty or thirty years ago," she protested.

" I told you Gilgamesh found it far too late to save his life."

She was silent for a long while and he said nothing to break the silence, allowing her the privacy of her thoughts. He sat with his back to the fire and listened to the quiet house, listened to the stillness of the night outside. Her nearness wafted the gentle perfume to his nostrils and he enjoyed that. Quite unconsciously she first straightened and then recrossed her legs beneath her skirt, briefly flashing slim ankles in the dim light. Shirley was silent for so long that at last he moved his head to look at her, to study the intense expression on her face. Their eyes met.

" All of this . . ." she paused and swallowed, " all of this is rather difficult to believe in one sitting. And not a little confusing."

" Is, yes. I'm aware of that." He smiled down at her. " I don't ask you to believe any of it, if you don't wish to." He moved his hand rapidly as though to wave it all away. " Consider it only a tale, told by another imaginative poet."

" No," she protested haltingly, " not quite that. I'm unable to grasp the whole thing, but not quite that. You'll have to forgive my slowness but I'm only—human. It seems just a little too much to perceive and believe all at once."

" I understand."

" Once before," she continued slowly, fumbling with an idea difficult to translate into words, " I asked you how old Gilgamesh was—at the time of Noah, for instance. Oh, and by the way, I've discovered since that Gilgamesh predated the biblical flood as well as postdated it, if we may believe the stone tablets. You see, I've been doing a little bit of research of my own."

" I see."

" But I'm curious about the age of Gilgamesh, about his original appearance on this—island. The tablets give no hint of course. How long ago was the shipwreck ? How long ago was Gilgamesh washed ashore ?"

Nash furrowed his brow. " Now *that* is difficult to answer. How would you mark time before the invention of the calendar ? The best I can do is make an estimate based on the people and the life he first discovered on the island. And then compare those people to present-day anthropological studies."

" I'll accept that. Which people ?"

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" The Azilian culture."

" Azilian ? I'm sorry, but that doesn't convey a meaning to me. I'm not familiar with it."

" It is generally identified with the early mesolithic period in western Europe." He was still watching her face, watching for the shock that he knew would be there. " That was roughly 8000 B.C."

She sat still with her eyes closed.

" The climate was quite warm—very similar to what it is today in that part of Europe; the last of the ice sheets had retreated northward and warm-weathered animals were starting to appear. The people—the Azilians—were a small-statured but wild hunting race; they possessed half-tamed dogs to aid them in the hunt, and lived chiefly on the wild cattle and horses that roamed the countryside. A very fierce race. The Azilians overflowed most of western Europe, I believe: Spain, Switzerland, France, Belgium and parts of Britain."

Shirley turned on him with wide staring eyes and he saw the shock reflected in them. " But that was nearly ten thousand years ago !"

He nodded agreement. " Was, yes."

Nash brought in from the kitchen a bubbling percolator and refilled their coffee cups, carrying hers across the room to place it beside her on the hearth-rug. Kindling had been added to the waning fire, rebuilding its light and warmth. He indicated the coffee. " Dr. Nash prescribes."

" Thank you. I suppose I've been acting like a dope ?"

" I wouldn't say that."

" I feel like one."

" Please don't."

" I try to keep an open mind," she explained. " I try at all times to be credulous and understanding and willing to learn new things. But sometimes I just can't help myself !"

" Quite human," Nash grinned, " oh, quite human."

" That's just it," she still protested. " *Human*."

" Stop it !" he said sharply. " I didn't mean it that way."

" I'm sorry." She lowered her eyes over the cup. After a moment, she said, " If you don't mind . . . I'd like to ask you something. And I promise not to make a scene."

" Fire away. I'll answer if I can."

" The shipwreck—" she began " —that shipwreck ten thousand years ago. You said that the body of his wife was washed ashore." She hesitated briefly as a quick, fleeting emotional shadow passed across his face. " Were there any other living survivors besides Gilgamesh ?"

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"Were, yes. The island was large and much of it was like an unexplorable jungle you must understand. Movement was next to impossible where there were barriers but no means of transportation. Naturally, while he searched for water he also sought his companions who might have lived. He found a few of them, eventually. The rest had either perished with the ship or were marooned in some inaccessible place. Slowly, with time, those few survivors appeared."

"Are they—are they still . . . ?"

"Alive today? No. With one exception they met early death. Some died of injuries, some were old and could not exist on the water found here, some met with accidents. One deliberately committed suicide in a Roman arena."

Shirley questioned, "With one exception . . . ?"

Nash glanced at her curiously. "Do you have access to your government's wartime secrets? You can check this if you like. In France, in 1940, two scientists fled their country to avoid the approaching enemy; they took with them to England two hundred and ten quarts of heavy water—or to be more accurate, they left France with two hundred and ten quarts, barely a jump ahead of the invading Germans who wanted that treasure. The fugitives fled across the channel with their deuterium oxide, which amounted to virtually the entire world's supply at that time and was therefore doubly precious. The two scientists arrived safely in England with one hundred and sixty-five quarts. But mark you this: they could not account for the shortage, could offer no reasonable explanation as to what had happened to the missing forty-five quarts. It was generally assumed they had been lost overboard."

"But they hadn't?" she queried.

He didn't answer her directly. "The loss of those fortyfive quarts was the first clue to the existence of another survivor—a survivor who still lived at this late day." Again he turned to her, watching her eyes and her sensitive face, wondering if she was mentally following him. "A search was instituted for that other survivor, sparked by the very natural desire to be reunited. And finally a trace was found."

"Nothing more than a trace?"

"A trace. At Peenemunde."

Shirley frowned. "I should know that name."

"The German rocket site, where the V-2's were built."

"Oh—of course." Her frown had not quite vanished. "And a trace of him was found there?"

"A trace of her was found there," he corrected.

"*Her*? A woman!"

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"A woman. It seems that she had been at Peenemunde for some years; since 1934 in fact, when the German government began seriously considering rocket experimentation. But now only a trace of her remained—she was gone, and forty-five quarts of heavy water had disappeared from the middle of the English channel with her. It wasn't too difficult to guess why she had been at Peenemunde, why she finally left there, and where she was going next. Not when you knew the nature of the woman. After all this time she was still not reconciled to the world in which she now lived, still not willing to stay, *very* unwilling to accept an early death. She wanted a ship to return home." He paused.

Shirley absently shook her head, not speaking.

"When the Germans began rocket experimentation at Peenemunde she quite naturally gravitated there, pulled by a hope and a prayer stronger than herself. She was, frankly, impatiently awaiting the day when they would fumble and grope beyond mere war rockets, beyond rockets themselves, for she knew something better was needed to conquer space. Given time and the proper channeling of energies, the Germans would build a ship for her. But the Germans had neither time nor the inclination; they concentrated their product on the destruction of London and similar purposes of war.

"She then must have realised that Peenemunde was not the answer, that Germany would not last long enough to build the ship she desired. So she fled—and seized life-giving water as she did so. After Germany—what? What other nation was experimenting with rockets, what other nation was also experimenting with atomic energy—which also happened to be the true answer to space flight? She came to the United States. Once in the United States she very carefully surveyed the situation and assayed her chances. And then made a choice. She married a young man who gave brilliant promise in the field of physics, aiding and abetting him by her own knowledge whenever possible, pushing here, thrusting him forward there, causing his name and work to appear in places and publications where it would be noted.

"The patient years of planning and scheming finally paid off and eventually her husband found himself working for the Manhattan District, found himself at Oak Ridge, and probably much to his surprise, found himself assisting in the designing and building of an atomic reaction motor which was capable of hurling a ship through space. At last her long-awaited victory was within her grasp and it seemed only a short wait before she could sail again. Her husband, now useless and something of a dangerous weight about her neck, was murdered."

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" Carolyn Hodgkins !" the girl exclaimed.

" Carolyn," he nodded. " She is determined to get off the earth and she will not be stopped as long as she lives." Nash fell silent, listening again to the house and the night.

" Carolyn Hodgkins is a—a survivor ?"

" Is, yes."

" The only other one ? No more than—two ?"

" No more than two."

" Is . . ." she hesitated with some embarrassment. " Is she the only one determined to live—and to leave ?"

" She is. The other one long ago resigned himself to remaining here, to a premature death. Without dramatics, without mock heroism, he simply accepted the situation and is now quite content to stay, to await what comes." Nash moved slightly on the hearthrug, turning and lifting a hand to touch her arm. " You must remember that the only thing I ever loved is buried here, somewhere. I *want* to stay."

There was a minute sound somewhere in the night, and Nash lifted his eyes to stare through the window at the sky.

" I think I can understand that," Shirley said haltingly and still with evident embarrassment. " And I'd like to ask . . . Please, this is rather personal, but . . ."

" Ask it." He was listening hard to the darkness.

" Did he—did you ever marry again ?"

" Marry ? No, not in that sense. I have mated—many times, but I never married again."

" Were there, I mean are there any descendants ?"

" Yes, a few." He shook his head. " A very, very few. My genetic curse still follows me, always will. But there are a few."

Shirley looked up, saw his gaze on the window and followed it, uncomprehending. " The descendants would not know, of course. They couldn't know."

" They have no way of knowing. I suppose most of them are pleasantly surprised to find themselves living to an unusual age. Unusual in respect to those around them."

" Do you know any of them ?" she persisted. " That is, do you *meet* them ? I'm sorry I can't express that more clearly—I'm all jumbled up inside and my thinking isn't any too lucid. But in your —travels have you ever found any of your own descendants ?"

" Have, yes." He was grinning broadly at some inner secret as he climbed to his feet and then reached out to help her up. She was standing quite close to him and he rested his hands on her shoulders. " It's always a startling thing; they appear most unexpectedly and in the strangest places. Of course there is seldom an outward physical

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trait to mark them, so I've learned to look for the subtler things—the attitude, the personality, the mental awareness and the matter of their longevity. That's the greatest clue, that and a talent for mental telepathy—for extra-sensory perception." He shook her playfully. "Yes, it happens every now and then. Makes me feel something like a fatuous grandfather."

Shirley hesitated, then said, "I still have a job, you know. A man will want to know about you."

"You tell the man what you please, or omit what you please. I know the man's curiosity—and so I haven't told you everything that I could." He hadn't told her, for instance, that a microphone had been planted in Dikty's office long before Dikty thought of putting an instrument in his. "I leave it up to your conscience, Shirley. Say as much or as little as you please. Only a word of warning for your own safety—consider first how much will be believed."

"That's my greatest problem," she admitted.

Shirley moved toward her purse on the table. "It's really late, I've got to go. And do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to sleep on everything that you've told me—everything about sailors and shipwrecks and survivors—and tomorrow I'll decide whether or not to believe it myself."

"A wise decision, and let me know your answer. And in the meantime thank you for the dinner. Practicing was fun."

She lifted her lips invitingly. "I liked it, too."

Nash kissed her briefly. "Tomorrow we can do it again."

"Tomorrow?" she questioned.

"*Some* tomorrow. You have several thousand coming."

Again she hesitated and lifted a forefinger to his lips. Changing her mind before the thought could be spoken, she repeated, "I've really got to go."

Nash pulled the car keys from his pocket and shook them in her face. "You'll either wait for me or you'll walk. And that's quite a distance to town." They were moving toward the door and he reached around her to snap on the outside light. He opened the door and stood aside for her.

"I'll wait for you—or I'd never get home. And I'll bet you that I'm late for work in the—*Gilbert*!" Shirley screamed his name and shrank back, blocking the doorway.

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## XII.

The long, raw sleepless night was reflected on her face. Hoffman sat miserably behind Dikty's desk in the inner office, struggling to keep her eyes open and holding up her head in both hands. Her head ached with a throbbing intensity and no amount of aspirin and strong coffee had been able to wash it away. Her legs were tired, tired from walking back and forth across the yard, from running in and out of Nash's house, and her body was as tired as her legs after a highly keyed night of excitement and nightmare.

"Tell me again," Cummings demanded savagely, "again and again!" He grasped the desk with both hands and seemed ready to overturn it. "Where did he go?"

"I don't know! I've told you, I don't know." She held her head tightly, afraid it would burst from pain and the booming anger of his voice. "He just disappeared."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"When?"

"I don't know. Before the police got there."

"Why did you call the police? Why didn't you call me?"

"Because he told me to. I didn't think of you—not then. Not until later."

"And later he was gone?"

"Yes."

"But you don't know when? You didn't see him go?"

"No—no, to both."

"You were together all evening? In the house?"

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"You didn't know Dikty was there, was tailing?"

"No. I hadn't seen Mr. Dikty all day."

"Where did you pick up Nash?"

"At the library. He invited me to dinner—or maybe I invited him. I can't remember now!"

"What happened after you left the library?"

"We walked along the street to his car and he drove me out to his house."

"Nothing else? You didn't stop anywhere, do anything?"

"No—well, he did pause a moment. To look in a florist's window."

"To get some flowers?"

"No, it was closed."

"He just stood there looking at the window? Did he seem pensive—thinking about something?"

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"Yes . . . he did that. I had to speak to him two or three times to catch his attention. I suppose he was daydreaming or something. He gave me some flippant answer about not being able to buy a plant." She put the tips of her fingers to the closed eyelids, pressing inward in a vain effort to relieve the ache there.

"And then he drove you out to the house? No stops?"

"No, no stops. I cooked dinner."

"What about after dinner? What happened then?"

"He showed me his library. He has a big room entirely lined with books, all manner of books."

"I saw that a few hours ago," Cummings snapped. "Then what?"

"We played records and I looked at the—the books."

The supervisor leaned low over the desk, thrusting his face within inches of hers. "You're lying! You didn't look at his books."

"Oh, all right then! I looked at some pictures."

"Pictures . . . ?"

"He has dozens of them. Old prints of Egyptian scenes, Babylonian scenes—everything."

Cummings drew back to study her. "Pictures," he repeated softly. "What was he doing all this time?"

"Reading. In the chair behind me."

"All the time? He never left the chair?"

"No. Yes, he did. Sometimes I would look up and he wouldn't be there."

"Gone from the room do you mean?"

"Yes," she answered miserably.

"How long was he gone?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid I didn't pay much attention. The hours slipped by—sometimes he would be there, and sometimes not. I can't tell you how long he was gone."

Cummings grunted sourly. "Gone. Nobody knows how long, nobody knows where."

"I couldn't help it, I tell you! I was lost in what I was doing. An army could have marched through the room."

"Pictures," he said once more, skeptically. "All right, after the pictures what?"

"We went out into the kitchen, made coffee. He built a fire in the fireplace. And then we sat there and talked."

"What about?"

"History—I mean prehistory. All about Gilgamesh, and Noah, and the ice age, and the Azilians—"

"What's that?"

"Prehistoric men who lived in Europe. Thousands of years ago."

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"Just talking? All that time?"

"Just talking, until I realised how late it was. He was going to drive me back to town."

"And then?"

"And then he opened the door and I saw . . . I saw . . ." Glaring memories of the beginnings of the nightmare rushed to the front of her mind, created a prickling sensation along the skin of her arms. She tried and failed to repress a chilling shudder. "Mr. Dikty—dead."

"What did Nash do?"

"He ran down the steps, turned him over."

"Did you see the lipstick?"

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"No, not then. Some policeman pointed it out later. I looked then."

"You don't know if the lipstick was there when Nash turned the body over?"

"No. All I could see was . . . was . . ."

"Did you ever see Dikty with another woman? Someone who was not his wife?"

"No, I never did. He wasn't that kind of a man."

"*Some* woman smeared lipstick on his mouth," Cummings said bitingly. "And *somebody* strangled him."

Hoffman didn't bother to answer. Her head had sunk nearly to the desktop.

"All right," Cummings said desperately, "let's go back to where we started. What happened after he turned the body over?"

"I only stood there, looking at it. And he said something I couldn't understand. Something strange."

"In a foreign language, do you mean? What did it sound like—French? German? Spanish?"

"No, none of those. It didn't sound like anything I'd heard before. He said two or three words—angry words." She briefly raised her head to stare at the supervisor. "I could tell he was angry, terribly angry."

"So am I," Cummings snapped at her. "You have no idea—yet—just how angry I am! I'm going to have somebody's life for this. What next? What did he do?"

"He said to me, did you know Dikty was here? And I told him I didn't."

"Did he believe you?"

"Yes."

"You were never aware that Dikty had been tailing either of you?"

"No, I never knew it."

"And then what?"

"He put his fingers—his hand, I guess, inside Mr. Dikty's coat a moment, and said he was dead. And then he bent down closer to look at his face. Mr. Dikty's face was . . ."

"Black," Cummings supplied. "Hadn't you ever seen a man strangled to death before?"

"Never!" She paused. "I think I was sick."

"What did Nash do then?"

"He told me to go back in the house and call the police."

"And you did. Without first calling me."

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"Yes. I didn't think of you, then." She rubbed her hands across her face. "After I called the police I sat down. I think I went into the bathroom; I must have been upset. Everything was so—so mad and whirling."

"What did Nash do?"

"I don't know. I don't remember seeing him again."

"You stayed in the house until the police arrived? In the chair?"

Hoffman nodded. "There, or in the bathroom."

"And the police gave you the works." He glanced at her briefly, studied the top of her head. "You really can't blame them; you were found alone with the body and you weren't wearing much lipstick. They like to leap to hasty conclusions."

"I didn't put any more on," she told him desperately. "We weren't going anywhere. He was driving me home and I was going to bed. I didn't bother to make up."

"I apologise for that," he said suddenly, softly. "I can imagine how you felt in jail. If the dumb bastards had bothered to compare your lipstick to that smeared on the body, they'd have seen the difference. I apologise, Hoffman. And they'll sweat for it."

She dropped her head to the desk. "Oh, don't bother."

Cummings perched on the edge of the desk and draped an arm across her shoulder. "Think a bit, now. While the two of you were sitting there talking—Did you hear anything? A noise?"

"No, I didn't."

"Did he?"

"He might have. He seemed to be listening and looking at the window. I didn't pay any attention to it at the time. But he might have heard something."

"He didn't investigate it?"

"No. We didn't sit there much longer. Just a few minutes more. And then I got ready to leave."

"At any time during the evening did he mention going away? Leaving town?"

"No, it never came up."

"Did you make plans to meet again?"

Her head moved in a subdued nod. "I was to see him again today. No definite plan, or place. But I told him I'd see him."

"He agreed?"

"Yes."

"Do you think he'll still keep that date?"

"I don't know. I haven't had time to think about it. He said—oh!" She jerked upright, startled. "You'll arrest him! If he comes to see me, you'll arrest him."

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"Of course. I can't think of better bait."

"But that isn't fair!"

Cummings got up from the desk, stood off to look at her. "Which side are you on?"

She glared at him for a bewildered moment and suddenly burst into tears.

"Stop that," he commanded. "I can't stand that."

She only dropped her head to the desk and continued crying. Cummings hovered over her for an indecisive moment, unable to do anything. Fretfully then, he paced a circle about the room and avoided looking at her. When he could no longer endure the sound of it he stalked into the outer office, pulling shut behind him the connecting door. Out there, the crying was no more than a low muffled noise. He sat down heavily behind the girl's desk and put his feet up on the edge, to run a nervous hand through his thinning hair. Placing the tips of his index fingers together above the ridge of his nose, Cummings stared past them and contemplated the doorknob.

What the hell—Dikty dead!

It wasn't Nash, damn the man. It wasn't Nash, despite the many minutes he had been absent from the room where Hoffman waited. It wasn't Nash, in spite of the fact that the murder occurred on his property while he was only a few feet away. No—it wasn't Nash. It was a woman. A woman who had first kissed—for some fantastic reason!—and then strangled Dikty to death. Strangled him while he lay in wait outside Nash's house. A woman. What woman? There was only one woman involved in this grizly mess. Hodgkins's widow. A woman who had undoubtedly made herself a widow. First Hodgkins, and then Dikty. But what the hell for? What could she possibly gain? Had it been Hodgkins alone, in the absence of other factors, it might have been an insurance murder. But now Dikty too. What in the devil's name did Hodgkins and Dikty have in common? That was simple—very simple. The one was an atomic physicist, the other a watchdog over the same. And a woman without a past had murdered both of them. Why?

And there was Nash, somehow akin to the woman without a past, without records of any kind.

But the one seemed to be *for*, and the other *against*. What kind of sense did that make when they were so obviously alike? Why should one be on *this* side while the other took the opposite? Both of them physically alike, both of them without duly recorded and stamped beginnings, and (most likely) both of them in the country illegally.

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He couldn't just appear in Florida in a given year without some kind of background—yet he did. And she near New York.

Cummings felt a vague, disturbed notion that he was caught up in something not of his own doing, caught in something he couldn't comprehend or understand.

He abruptly left Hoffman's desk and went to the door, opening it slightly to look in on her. The tears had ceased.

"Hoffman . . . ?"

She raised her head. "Yes?"

"Think hard, now. Did you see any of the signs of a woman out there at the house? Anything at all?"

The girl turned and stared. "Why, no!"

"Nothing at all? The bedroom—bathroom? Something that I would have overlooked but you'd have caught?"

Wide-eyed she returned his gaze and shook her head. "Not a thing. I would have noticed."

Cummings sighed with defeat. "All right. It was just an idea. I sort of hoped—"

"I wouldn't have stayed a minute if I had seen something there."

"Okay, okay, forget it." He studied her worn face. "You'd better go home and get some sleep; you're not worth a plugged penny to me the way you are now."

"I'm beat," she confessed. "Really beat. That was horrible!"

"I can believe it." His gaze lingered on her face and a trace of sympathy crept into his voice. "Get a cab and go on home. Shoo."

She came around the desk to lay a hesitant hand on his arm. "Mr. Cummings, I'm sorry I failed you. I've let you down terribly. I had built such dreams . . . When you told me I could work on the case with you, told me to call Mr. Dikty my cousin if trouble should come—well—I'm afraid I built such foolish dreams. I thought I would set the world on fire; I saw myself in all manner of pseudo-heroic guises. I know better now."

Cumming lifted her drooping chin and smiled at her dulled eyes, haggard face. "A night in jail can kill the dreams in anyone. It's rough. Let the words wait until you've slept, slept around the clock. We can discuss these things tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," she repeated wanly. "He said that."

"He said what?"

"That I could cook dinner for him again tomorrow. He didn't mean today, but tomorrow. Any tomorrow. He said I would have a thousand of them."

"What did he mean by that?"

"I don't know, really. He just said it."

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## XIII.

Nash perched on the hillside, surveying the lights of the sleeping city spread out beneath him. By turning his head slightly he could see the dark outline of the road snaking out from the city, could see the smaller cluster of madly bobbing lights that were the police about his house. The police were down there now, with the strangled body of Dikty, with the near-hysterical girl. But back in the other direction the street lights of the city claimed his attention. He crouched in the underbrush on the side of the hill, studying the city and its lights.

Carolyn was in there—somewhere.

She was secreted there, safely hidden away from the prying eyes of the police, from Cummings, from himself. And *that* rankled. Secreted from him, the only one of all the billions of people in the world who actually knew her, had known her a long, long time. She had been hidden away—somewhere—since that day many weeks ago when she first deserted and then murdered her husband—the last in line of many such husbands. Hidden so well that none had ever found her. The police, then Cummings and Dikty, then he himself had followed every suggestive trail, had searched out the hotels, the rental units, the real estate agencies, the very utility offices that must supply her with those things she wanted and needed: water, electricity, gas. But she had not been found.

There was no evidence that she had slipped out of town and, until tonight, none that she had stayed. No house, apartment or room could be located that might have been rented her, no automobile had been sold her, the family bank account had remained untouched. Knowing Carolyn, he knew those last items meant nothing in themselves—the woman who now called herself Carolyn Hodgkins had had ample time to accumulate and hide material wealth in any part of the world. Carolyn Hodgkins could have existed without beauty parlours these past few weeks, without entertainment, without small luxuries, without clothes, without this or that to which she had become accustomed in her lifetime. But she could not exist without food and water and it was highly unlikely that she had existed without electricity and possibly gas. Still, there appeared no record or evidence that those things had been furnished her. Any reasonable man examining the known facts would finally conclude the woman was no longer on the scene.

But she still *was*, as the second death proved.

She had killed again with a swift and sure purpose—not an idle killing because the man happened to be standing there watching the house. She had kissed him to suck his mind of information, and then she had killed him. Carolyn had remained on the scene all these past

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weeks while the search continued. It was she who had been following him as he followed the plodding Dikty, she whose eyes had bored into the back of his skull with malevolent intensity. She had been following Dikty—and Nash had fallen into line between. Then Dikty must have been close to her, dangerously close.

Nash hugged the overgrown hillside, squinting into the darkness. Dikty *had* discovered her hiding place. And paid with his life.

She who was currently known as Carolyn Hodgkins was imaginative, brilliant in her field—and cruel. Like those few other survivors she had come plummeting down from the wrecked vessel so many centuries ago, down into a tangled jungle of a land peopled with aborigines. That much he knew about Carolyn, although he had not seen her for ten thousand years—not since before the wreck. He remembered the woman as one of the navigation crew; possibly he had encountered her almost daily on shipboard, eaten in the same room or at the same table with no marked attention to her. He knew her well enough, but like himself she had been but one among a crew of nearly three hundred. He knew she was keen on navigation; given a ship and the power, she was quite capable of charting a route to any point in creation. The stars had changed in their courses in ten thousand years, but not enough to prevent Carolyn from finding her way home again. He remembered Carolyn, remembered her from the voyage of ten thousand years ago —and he had since heard more.

It was difficult *not* to be talked about.

Old Raul had first told him something of her; Raul, who had fallen into the fertile, half-barbaric country surrounding the Nile and in pure self-preservation set himself up in the priesthood. Raul had once crossed the Mediterranean in his declining days seeking a substance of truth to the Gilgamesh legends, and had told him a little about a third survivor. A third who lived far to the south, deep in the southern regions of the African continent; for more than a hundred years the continual rumours and stories drifted north on the lips of slaves, in the campfire tales of traders and thieves roaming the land. A woman, a beautiful white woman in the jungle fastness, a fiery, golden goddess who had fallen from the skies and had been enthroned by the aborigine warriors. She was brilliant, she was imaginative, she was cruel. She gave lands and crops and wealth and wives to those who served her; gave sudden death to those who did not. She introduced the rites and rituals of human sacrifice, taught the art of bow-making, of honing better spears and blades, taught a rudimentary knowledge of the heavens which rapidly degenerated into a mystical religion. The white goddess seemed to live forever.

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They could not guess which of the ship's crew she might be, old Raul and he, but by analyzing her conduct they narrowed the probable suspects to a handful. And later, much, much later when the means of transportation were available, he had gone searching for her only to find the goddess and the warrior race so much vanished dust.

She came to his attention again almost in his own land, his own yard, when the ritualistic dances of bulls and youths appeared in the Aegean islands. He *knew* the original source of those rites, knew the faraway world among the stars where such dances were a common thing. It was an easy realisation to know that only a survivor from the ship could have introduced an otherworldly custom into the Aegean lands. But he could not find her. He discovered long afterward that she was the lion-goddess personified on Cretan coins and rings, but the discovery came too late to assist him in his search.

And oddly enough, a brazen caricature of her existed on one of those illustrations brought back from Egypt by Napoleon's free-wheeling artist. A caricature copied from some other unknown source, but roughly recognizable. In time, he knew the identity of the white African goddess, the introducer of human sacrifice and cattle rites, but not once in all the ten thousand years had he managed to meet up with her. He was very close to her at Peenemunde, but once again she had slipped away. He was closer now, closer than he had been at any time since the ship met its death in space. He knew she was in the United States when he landed on the shore, knew what her destination would be once the destination itself had come into existence.

And so he had drifted into Oak Ridge and settled down to await her appearance. And then one day a bewildered physicist had come to him for consultation. And Carolyn was pegged.

She was not content to stay here, to spend her remaining though shortened years on a paradise planet. She yearned mightily to return home, to her native world where she might yet outwit death in a reversion to the natural waters of her kind. Carolyn was younger than he, Nash reflected. Younger, less mature, more impulsive and certainly more hopeful. As well as more deadly. She had quickly enough shed the civilized conduct of her own world when adapting herself to this new one. Old Raul, Raul of the fabulous age and equally fabulous memory had said that no one of their race deliberately brought death to another. No one until Carolyn found herself a despotic goddess, that was. Their struggling race was far too dependent upon life.

But Carolyn murdered her latest husband—and was pegged. And then she killed the one man who had found out her hiding place. Why had she first kissed him? To discover if he held any knowledge not yet known to her, to discover if he knew the date and the place that

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one important ship would be hurled into the sky. Dikty might have known that, considering his occupation, his organization. Or he might have known nothing at all about it. Still, she could not afford to pass up the opportunity; and so she had kissed and killed.

Dikty, of all men, had found her hiding place.

You're down there, Carolyn, down there somewhere in the maze of lighted streets or surrounding patches of darkness. But *where*, damn you, where?

Nash turned his head again, turned back to the black ribbon of road that wound out of the city and past his house. The tiny lights were still there, running crazily back and forth, in and out of the house and across the yard, running from the massed automobiles to the glob of light which illuminated the front steps and the strangled body.

Hoffman was due for some rough handling. He hoped she had the quick wit to telephone Cummings; he hadn't thought to tell her that before he left, hadn't thought to have her call her supervisor before she phoned the police. And he had left in a hurry before anyone could arrive, so there was no returning to give safe advice. She would have to take her chances, and perhaps Cummings could get to her before too long. He felt proud of the girl—quite proud. It was fatuously pleasing to discover some of his own character traits recurring in her, and he wondered briefly how long it might be before she guessed the truth?

When she had surprised him with that hot, rapturous kiss in his library, it had proved so startling not to perceive the end of her life.

But Carolyn had foreseen her husband's end, whether or not at that time she knew *she* would be responsible for his death. In the years of their marriage and the steady meeting of connubial love she had known everything of her husband; had known his past before they had met, had known his present even though he attempted to leave his work at the laboratory, and had finally known his future—a short, surprising future that ended not too far away. In such close, personal meeting nothing is hidden from the one mind prying into another, nothing can remain secreted away in the mental nooks of the past, the open surface channels of the present or the unformed and grey vista of the future. The past is there, for searching; the present is there, for reading; and the future is there for possible interpretation. Carolyn had finally looked into her husband's mind and found that its future path came to an abrupt halt bare weeks away. She must have attempted to search forward in his subconsciousness, to search for what was to come—and discovered only blankness, a blankness that meant the mind would shortly cease to exist. Hodgkins was going to die. Carolyn hastily deserted him.

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But three weeks later she returned to murder him—why? To seal his lips? Knowing him as she did, she realised he might talk about her, about them, but not dangerously or wildly, for Hodgkins would be greatly concerned with his own sanity and would take pains to reveal no damaging facts which might lay himself open to suspicion, to self-injury. So at first she had not worried about the possibility of his talking, and had left him to wait out the weeks until his death—even perhaps wondering all the while how that death could come about. Hodgkins had then done the one thing which upset her calculations; he had called on Nash. If she had been keeping an eye on her husband at all, she would have known of the visit and guessed at its conclusions. It was then likely that she had returned to their home that evening and perhaps realised for the first time that *she* was the instrument of death.

Hodgkins, being Hodgkins, would have blurted out all the details of the interview with the private investigator when his wife confronted him. *And* quite possibly have remarked the strange similarity between his wife and Nash. If Carolyn had not previously known Nash was in Knoxville, that would have been a startling shock. In an instant, she would have grasped all that his presence meant. Exit, Gregg Hodgkins. Nash would get no more information from him!

But it was such a useless death.

Nash had all the information he really needed to know—except one piece of course, which did not develop until afterward. *Where was Carolyn hiding?* How had Dikty found that hiding place where all others had failed? What one morsel of evidence did Dikty have that the others did not possess or what shrewd deduction had he made that the others could not yet grasp? Or (ironically) what bit of dumb luck had he stumbled over which was not likely to be repeated for any who followed after?

Nash waited on the darkened hillside, crouching low and waiting for the anonymity of night to return to the road, to the house and the couple of acres. In memory he retraced the patternless path he and Dikty had strewn along the afternoon streets, retraced the seemingly aimless wanderings from one door to another, seeking a clue to Carolyn. The path that had actually led back to Carolyn in some dubious manner.

Below him on the road some few lights winked out and two or three automobiles moved off toward the city. There were still figures ranging about his house and even a lone flashlight poking among the trees of the apple orchard. He could not go back there, not now, maybe never. Someone would be staked out there until eternity, waiting for him to come back to claim his possessions. Cummings

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would regard that as mere routine; Cummings might even play it smart and send Hoffman in as bait.

Nash dropped his eyes from the distant scene, to stare at the looming indistinct whiteness of his hands before him. Shirley Hoffman: *good-bye* probably, or at the very least, *so long*. To go back to her now for whatever reason would place her in a position of jeopardy, would force her to choose between him and her sworn loyalties. He did not want to force such a decision upon her. Still, he fervently hoped their paths might cross again someday, somewhere in the future. He would deem it a stroke of rare fortune to meet that girl again during her long lifetime.

In the first false light of dawn, Nash quit his position on the hill and sought out the poorly gravelled road that circled and snaked around it. Fifteen minutes' slow, careful walking brought him to the steep ravine where he had ditched his car. He looked down at it with a tinge of regret, but it was not to be helped because every police officer in the state would already be searching for that car. Sometime in the next few hours a rural traveller along the road would find it, report it, and it would be known that he was afoot. Nash turned his back on the smashed car and descended the rugged hillside.

He went with the wry memory of the hundreds or perhaps thousands of times he had done the same thing in the past, always fleeing something or someone.

The very first time had been his wild, surprised flight from the runty, fierce warriors who hunted with half-tamed dogs; they had been seeking wild boar and flushed him instead. The track of a flint spear point across his arm had been the first wound he had known, had been the fast realisation that not all worlds and all people worshipped life as did his own. But the Azilian hunters had been a warning foretaste of what was to come. They were the last of the hunting races but not the last of murderous mind.

He had attempted—with fair success—to introduce some few civilizing measures to a wandering Neolithic people. He taught them to build wooden huts, to cast pottery, to breed work animals in captivity, to plant crops and work the soil, and to grind and polish tools. But in the end he again was forced to flee. He lived too long. They were not burdened with the superstitions to make of him a god or a devil, not imaginative enough to weave a legend of immortality—they were simply suspicious and decided he was evil. He ran for his life, and not for the second time.

He had drifted south to discover that the stone age in which he found himself did not cover all portions of the planet simultaneously.

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Whereas a people of a tribe behind him worked laboriously with crude stone tools, ahead of him to the south, on all shores of the great inland sea, were new people who already knew the art of writing, knew the use of iron, of copper and bronze. Settling among them he had made another pleasant, surprising discovery—their art of writing was not of their own invention; it was a writing he could decipher and read with some difficulty. Some other unknown survivor of the wreck had been there ahead of him. That other man or woman could not now be found, but what he had left for Nash to find in later centuries was a warming thing.

In all those ten thousand years of cultural evolution—Azilian, Tardenosian, Maglemosean, the Camprignian, Ertbolle, Asturian (as men now named them), the later Egyptian, Crete, Minoan—in all those ten thousand years he had been forced to run from something, sometime. As he was running now, from men who believed he posed a threat to their national security.

The boy's sudden voice startled him.

"Hey there—where ya' going?"

Nash looked up, discovered the boy just across a fence. The lad was plodding along behind a small herd of cattle, and had twisted around to stare at Nash in his hasty descent of the hill.

"Hello," Nash called back. "I didn't see you. Going down to find a garage. My car's in the ditch up there." He pointed a vague thumb behind him.

"Where?" the boy asked curiously.

"You know that gravel road—the one that looks like a corkscrew? Near a lot of pink-and-black rocks. I'm in the ditch up there."

"Sure, I know that place. You didn't get hurt?"

"No, I'm all right. Just taking a short cut down into town."

"There ain't no short cut that way," the boy declared.

"No?" Nash paused to inspect the terrain, hoping the youngster wouldn't mention this incident to his parents. "Do you know a better one?"

"Sure," the lad replied with positive superiority. "Just climb over the fence and cut across here and go down there by them trees"—he turned to point out the grove—"and you'll see a path. Then just foller that around by the Norwood place—look out for his dogs, though. And pretty soon you'll come out right behind that trailer court down there. They got a phone."

"I'll do that, and many thanks."

"Be sure to watch out for the dogs, now."

"Will do. And thanks again." Nash climbed the fence and struck out across the pasture. He was among the shelter of the trees before

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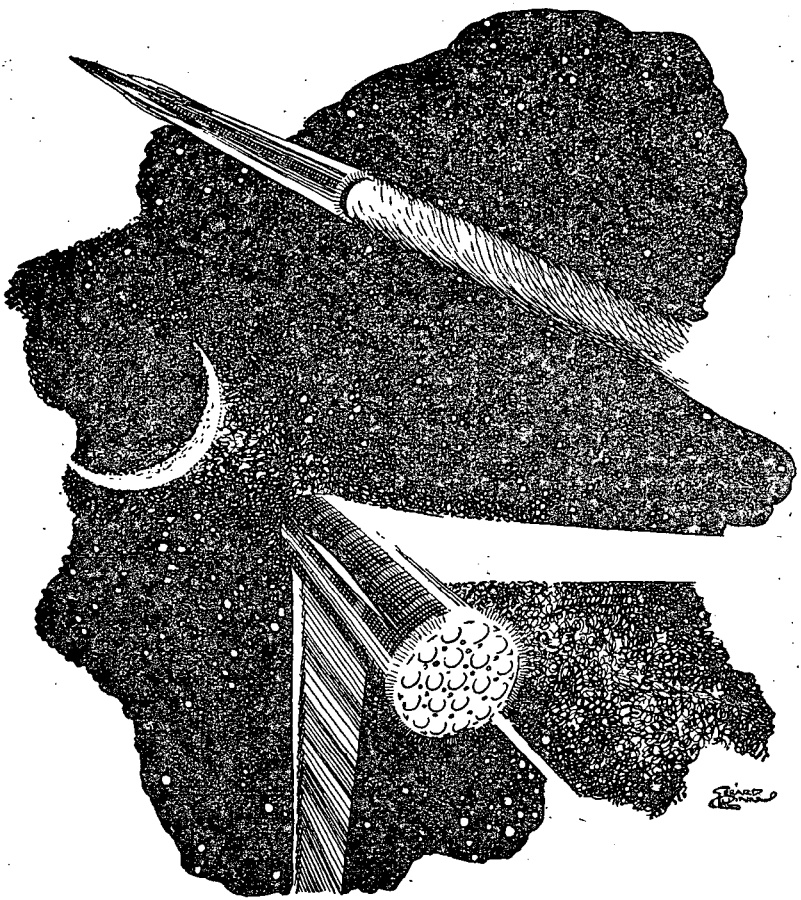

the deeper significance of the boy's statement smote him. The trailer court had a phone.

It also had electricity, running water, perhaps canned gas if the patron required it. The transient used the camp's facilities, simply made the proper connections to a trailer. The transient paid the proprietor a sum therefore; it was not necessary to go into town and sign up for the utilities. The court was quite removed and separated from the city; the rental of parking space was a daily or weekly affair and settled on the spot. Anyone having a trailer in that court could, if he wished,

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merely glance out of the window to observe the traffic moving along the road. Anyone having a particular interest in some person living farther up that same road would find it simple to watch that person coming and going. Without being seen himself, without having to venture into the city unless he wished to run the risk.

There, Carolyn? Living in a trailer?

Nash moved more swiftly along the downward path, threading his way among the trees and into the open country beyond them. A house loomed up finally in the growing dawn and he kept a cautious watch for dogs; one inside the house commenced a furious barking but no one interfered with his quick passage. He continued along the faint trail, sometimes losing it in the underbrush and then having to beat around in hasty circles to find it again. The boy had said "pretty soon" but nearly twenty minutes had passed and the sun was breaking the horizon before he sighted the trailer court. Nash stopped on the hill to study the layout.

It was modern and of good size, having crushed rock for streets and individual walks up to each trailer door. Two sides of the court, those sides facing away from town and toward the outlying hills, were lined with head-high shrubbery and young trees; the third side lay open, looking down upon the city, while the remaining boundary faced the road. Nash sat down with his back to a tree, watching the camp and studying the trailers.

They were of varying sizes and all conditions of age or newness; there was no hint in that. Several, this early in the morning, already had wash hanging on the outside lines and he eliminated them from his search. A few children emerged from some, or men who clambered into near-by cars and drove off toward the city, or women who stood and gossiped with still other women in neighbouring doorways. Still he stayed on the hill, patiently waiting and checking off the possibilities, one by one. Here, a couple appeared, to talk with wildly waving arms and then return inside; there, a baby was brought out into the warm sun, and then another. An old man came out, to walk around his home checking the air pressure of the tyres. A grocer's delivery truck turned in from the road and made its slow way toward one of the units. Nash leaned forward with intent eyes, following its passage. The truck turned about, backed a few feet and the driver jumped out to open the rear door. A woman appeared from the near-by trailer to watch the driver. Nash relaxed against the tree, checking off that unit from his mental list.

By mid-morning he was down to a half dozen lifeless trailers, a half dozen which hadn't as yet given forth any sign of life or movement.

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At noon, one of the half dozen was eliminated. A man opened the door, came out into the sun to stretch and rub the sleep from his eyes. That left five. In mid-afternoon the five remained and Nash was stretched out on his back on the ground, tired by the long watch and growing more hungry by each passing hour. In the late afternoon the morning exodus returned, the men who drove in from town, the children who had been playing about all day and those who'd been absent, the sons and husbands and fathers and paramours back from work for a night's sleep or play. One by one they arrived and Nash checked them into the trailers they had left that morning—and with their coming two of the question marks were eliminated. A couple drove into the court and unlocked the door of one of those lifeless units; to be followed shortly by a man alone who entered another. Nash supposed those three had left in the early morning hours before he assumed his watch.

Three trailers remained, three mute question marks. Two parked near the shrub-lined boundary before him and a third nearer the road.

It was dark.

Tired legs cramped and stomach demanding food, Nash arose from the ground and moved slowly down the hill. The night around him was filled with tiny cricket noises and somewhere near at hand a bird was calling. A brick building set against the rear shrub-line housed a public bath, and Nash stopped there first for water, after working his way through the trees and shrubbery. The water helped a bit but still his hunger clamoured for attention.

Nash left the building and edged toward the nearer trailer that had claimed his interest. All about him were the human noises of the court, the odours of food and tobacco drifting on the heavy air, the sound of running water and noisy radios. Footsteps crunched on the loose rock as someone made his way to the bath building, and Nash faded back into the surrounding darkness until he should pass.

The first of the three silent trailers came beneath his questioning fingers, still faintly warm from the day's hot sun. It was a long, low streamlined vehicle, sparkling silver and maroon when seen by daylight. His fingers had contacted one rounded corner of it and now he slowly edged toward the door, listening intently for sounds within. At a window he stopped, twisted his face up to read a notice pasted there. *For Sale.* Nash hesitated only a moment more and then boldly stepped to the door and tried the knob. It turned easily and the panel swung open on emptiness.

Within fleet seconds he was beside the second one. Using the same cautious approach as before, Nash worked his way around to the trailer door and tapped lightly. There was no answer. He tapped again and

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at the same time gently twisted the knob. The door was locked. Nash swung back into the concealing shrubbery and made his way toward the third and last trailer—that one nearest the road.

It too was silent—as dark, as seemingly lifeless as it had been all the long day. There was no movement from within, no sound. Nash knew the silent darkness of it was a lie. The door of the trailer stood open as if to welcome him and only a light screen door protected the interior from night-flying insects. Despite the absence of sound or motion the stillness was a lie, for there was the tempting odour of food. He lifted his nostrils to the odour, moved a single step nearer the screen. Abruptly there came a hissing sound and before he could jerk away there came still another—that of a suddenly bubbling percolator. Within a moment the odour of the steaming coffee was carried through the screen to him.

Nash grinned tightly and stepped to the screen door; he could see nothing at all in the blackened interior.

He said, " I've come, Carolyn."

Her answer came promptly, a low, husky feminine voice from the trailer's interior. " I've been waiting for you, Gilbert. Waiting all day."

Nash nodded, still with the tight, knowing grin on his lips. " All day." The sound of her voice wiped out the millenniums as though they had never been. " All day."

" I discovered you up there watching me. You have the patience of a mule, Gilbert. And the intelligence."

He reached for the screen door.

## XIV.

" Close the door," the husky voice commanded him, " and turn on the lights. I want to look at you, mule."

Nash gently pushed the door shut behind him and fumbled along the wall until his fingers found the light switch. " Put away the gun, Carolyn," he suggested, and flipped the wall switch. The sudden brightness caused him to squint.

She sat casually relaxed, confidently smiling, on a long divan that filled the front of the trailer, stretching across the room from wall to wall. She was attired in light green lounging pyjamas which seemed to hug and caress her body, to display and accent her physical endowments. Carolyn held an automatic in her hand.

Nash simply stood and looked at her, looked at the crown of flowing golden hair which now seemed somewhat lighter than he remembered

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looked at the glowing yellow eyes which had lost none of their fiery magnetism. The smooth skin of her face was—if you knew what to search for—only now beginning to show signs of age, but the tiny wrinkles and indentations had not yet appeared on her neck or her hands. He looked at her hands, at the gun held in one of them, looked closely at the clinging green garment she wore and all that it pretended to conceal, stared at her and through her with the accumulated curiosity of ten thousand years. She was disturbingly attractive, provocative. He would never deny that, could easily understand how Gregg Hodgkins had fallen under her spell. Hodgkins and how many others? And *this* stage was set for him. Carolyn had carefully prepared for still another conquest.

Nash relaxed against the doorsill. "It's been a long time, Carolyn."

"Don't be melodramatic, Gilbert. I appreciate neither the irony nor the understatement. And don't just stand there; sit down." Her voice was low and coaxing as she patted the divan. "Over here."

He studied her a moment more, studied her eyes and the gun in her hand, the stage she had set for the two of them, finally to turn away from her and seat himself on a straightback chair beside a tiny table. A meal awaited him there and he examined it with interest—a browned steak still slowly sizzling on its plate, nearly a half dozen side dishes, and at his elbow the automatic percolator ceased its mad bubbling and shut itself off. In all, much more than he could possibly eat although he had touched nothing since the previous evening. Nash examined each dish on the table and swung his gaze back to the woman.

"Homey," he said.

"Aren't you hungry, Gilbert?"

"You know damned well I am!" The old, tight grin had reappeared a grin that seemed to mock her.

"I fixed it for you, when I saw you leave the hill. We can talk while you eat, Gilbert."

"I'm sure you did—really fixed it!"

She jerked stiffly erect to frown at him. "Oh, don't be silly! Why would I want to kill you?"

Nash glanced down at the gun. "Why, indeed?"

Carolyn continued to frown, half angry at his insinuation. She became aware that her gaze had drifted to the untouched food on the table and quickly forced her attention back to him. "Aren't you going to eat it? After I went to all the trouble? Gilbert, you must be starving."

"What was that crack about irony?" he wanted to know.

"Please!" she retorted sharply, "let's not quarrel—not you and me. It's been too long a time, Gilbert, and we're all that are left. Let's be friends—please?"

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Nash gently moved aside the steak plate and propped an elbow on the table. "All right; we're friends—for a little while." He glanced again at the gun. "How are you, Carolyn?"

"Fine, thank you. And you?"

"Just fine."

After that was silence. Nash kept his eyes on the woman, on her hands and her body, on the way she sat on the divan. He watched for a sudden tenseness or stiffening of the relaxed body. Almost lazily he dropped his chin onto the palm of his hand. After a while he blinked.

"Let's talk," Carolyn suggested uneasily.

"Let's," Nash agreed. "About what?"

"About us—and the others. Gilbert, do you realise how *long* it has been? We are the only ones left alive, aren't we? I was afraid so. I'm *so* glad I found you; there were times when I wanted to kill myself because of the loneliness! Gilbert, it was terrible." Her hands were moving restlessly in her lap, striking her knees to emphasise the emotions behind her words. The gun always managed to remain pointed at him. "I'm glad you came through all right."

"Likewise." He nodded. "Some wild little men wanted to stick me for a pig but I disappointed them."

"What of your wife—Atartle?"

"Died in the explosion," he answered without emotion. "Didn't have time to fasten her suit."

"Oh." A moment's thoughtful silence. "And the others?"

Nash slowly blinked his eyes, inhaling the aroma of the coffee beside him. "There was Raul—you remember Raul? Ship's doctor? He died a short while ago in Egypt, an old, old man. Died happy, you might say. Raul was the first to tell me about you, incidentally; he'd heard stories drifting up from the south and we speculated on who might be causing them." He closed one eye, stared at her with the other. "Some stories."

She made no answer.

"And there was Santun, the second officer," Nash went on. "Santun was the only fool in the lot—he committed suicide in a Roman arena. Santun was a devil with the ladies (as *you* may know!) but lacking in good judgment; when he finally realised he was marooned here for the rest of his life he ran wild. Woke up one morning to find himself with a disease that wouldn't be cured, and chose a violent and spectacular death in the arena to a slow and inglorious one elsewhere. Raul and I were unwilling witnesses." The teasing odour of the coffee haunted his nostrils though he tried to ignore it. "And Leef, the geologist—he came out of the wreck too. Leef wasn't as initially lucky as some of the rest of us; he nearly froze to death when he fell

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in the snow country, far to the north. His first winter was almost the last for him. But he grew to like it, I suppose, for he stayed there. After a while he outfitted an expedition and sailed across the Atlantic, seeking this continent. I never saw him again." Nash suddenly shifted in the chair, turning his back on the table and the coffee. Carolyn was watching him with a tiny smile. The gun lay carelessly in her lap.

"I also discovered a girl named Brunna—did you know her?" He let his eyes close to shut out temporarily the sight of Carolyn. "Brunna worked with motors but her real interest was anthropology. Can you guess where I found her? In the mountains back of Afghanistan, searching for the source of life of these people." He spread his hand in a half-circle to encompass the trailer court and the city beyond. "She seemed to think she had found it, in the place they call Tibet. Are you interested in all this?" He didn't bother to open his eyes and see if she were interested, or to wait for a spoken answer. "Brunna and I enjoyed each other; we were seriously considering marriage when she was caught up by the soldiers of some Minoan king. Brunna was given alive to a lion, to appease some legendary lion-goddess." His eyes snapped open and he swung back to Carolyn. "This goddess was a bloodthirsty bitch."

The silence came again.

After a while Carolyn asked, "All of us in that one hemisphere? None here?"

"Apparently not; that part of the world was directly beneath the ship when it cracked up. I thought I had found some traces here in the new world but they proved to be only imitations. No—none here, until we came. Unless of course Leef made it."

"Were there no more?" Carolyn asked then. "Only Raul, and Santun, Leef and Brunna, you and I? Is that all?" There was no hint of an emotion in her husky voice. "Six out of three hundred! I would have liked seeing them again."

"You were too busy being a white goddess," he answered laconically. When she said no more, he continued with a sudden spurt of enthusiasm "There *was* someone else. Perhaps more than one. *Someone* introduced a form of writing to one of the old civilizations; a degenerate copy of that form still existed when I arrived among them, changed and broken, but readable after a fashion. I never found the originator. It was none of our six survivors; I made certain of that. But for a while there was someone else."

"Not I," she told him.

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" No—not you. I've been quite interested in you, Carolyn. When I could, I followed you over most of the world although I did not always know your identity. When I reached southern Africa you had long gone and your little empire there had blown away with the winds; by the time I returned to the Mediterranean you had also been there, to vanish once again. But *there* you left a few things behind that had not blown away." His hard stare bored into hers. " The dances, the bulls and the lions, the feasts of blood. Those things came from Ichor, Carolyn, and few of our ship's company had ever visited Ichor. Too, queer mementos of your passing turned up in Crete, in Egypt—in my library up the road I have a pornographic caricature of you. Maybe I should compliment you on your vivid imagination." He shrugged and half turned away. " But I never found you. So much time passed without my finding you that at last I decided you were dead, like Raul, like Leef, like the other two. I had really given you up for lost—until the rocket experiments started in Germany.

" I very nearly caught you in Germany, Carolyn. It may have only been a matter of weeks, even days, that I missed you again. And then when I learned of the theft of the forty-five quarts of water during this last war, I knew you had gone, and guessed where you were going. So—I followed you here, prepared for your eventual discovery. And here we are." He blinked at her.

" Yes; mule, here we are. I wondered how long you would need to get around to that." She stretched, moving her slim legs in provocative fashion. " Here we are, you and I, the last two alive in a world of savages. And so . . . ?"

He lifted his head to stare at a point above her, to stare into the past. " Raul said that you were evil."

" Raul was a meddling old fool !" she snapped.

" Raul," he contradicted, " was the oldest and wisest man I have ever known. His memory of our people and our kind of life goes back before my father's time, and perhaps your father's as well. He said that you were evil and I have learned to accept his judgment. He said you had lost all regard for life—other's lives, the lives of these people you term savages; he said that you had learned to kill or cause death at a whim, to maim and destroy as it pleased you. I have found that to be true. The swathe of death and destruction you've left behind you cannot be denied; your black record is a blot on the civilization and the world that gave you birth. Carolyn, you might have been born on Ichor, so far have you gone. You killed Brunna, you killed your husband and you killed again yesterday." Nash brought his eyes down to lock with hers. " You will kill again tonight if you are able."

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The careless, mocking smile remained on her face, a frozen curvature of the lips that seemed to enhance her beauty. The gun was at attention, aimed at his heart.

"And you, mule? You are going to play the judge?"

He shook his head. "You haven't been listening, Carolyn. I said that Raul was an older and wiser man than I can ever hope to be. Raul was your judge long ago, and he said you were evil. I accepted his judgment."

"Policeman, then? You will be a policeman?"

"No, there are no police in our life; I wouldn't have the stomach for it if there were. I couldn't hand you over to the authorities here because I know what they would do to you—and that would be equal to killing you myself. I couldn't hang you, or whatever punishment they deal out to murderers in this state. I will not be a party to that."

"That's very considerate of you, mule." She was almost laughing at him, laughing with the sure knowledge of having an advantage on him. "Considerate, and quite noble. You must be fairly bursting with noble humility. But you followed me here for *some* purpose! You admitted it. Didn't you?"

"Did, yes. To offer you a choice."

"Still being noble," she retorted bitingly. "A choice of what?"

"Of remaining here with me in this world. And of forsaking your evil ways if you do remain."

"That isn't all of it!" she snapped, the laughter suddenly gone. "What is the alternative?"

"Why," he said simply, "of continuing on your way—of going wherever you think you are going."

She sat up with astonishment. "You call *that* a choice?"

"You'll find it one if you persist with your plan." He blinked and rubbed the skin above his temple, wondering how much information she possessed. "Of going wherever you think you are going," he repeated. "Where *do* you think you are going, Carolyn? Your husband didn't know the purpose or the ultimate destination of that ship. And I don't believe Dikty knew it." Suddenly he smiled at her. "You'd be wise to accept my offer."

"Oh, you fool, you utter fool! You've lived among the savages for so long their stupidity has rubbed off on you. You're offering me a choice of nothing!"

"I'm offering you a choice between life and death," he softly contradicted her.

"You lie! You have nothing to offer."

"Carolyn," Nash said gently, "I can't hang you; you know that I can't harm you in any way unless it be in self-defence. Despite what

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you've done to Brunna, to those others, I can't kill you for it. You know that and you are laughing at me." He lowered his voice. "Carolyn, this I can do: I *can* let you commit suicide if you desire."

She laughed at him then, a husky, raucous sound that filled the trailer cabin with mocking noise. "And do you think, noble mule, that I am about to commit suicide? Like your Santun perhaps? Do you really, mule?" Her wild laughter continued.

Nash waited patiently until she had stopped. "Yes," he told her.

"But the Roman arenas are gone!" she exclaimed gaily.

"A ship exists."

Carolyn sobered, stared hard at him. "Have you forgotten my profession so soon? Have you forgotten that I was a navigator?"

"No, I haven't forgotten that."

"Do you doubt my ability to take that ship up?"

"There's an element of chance involved."

"Of course there's an element of chance involved!" she blazed. "An element of chance is involved every time a ship takes to the sky, anywhere, any time. A thousand chances are run on a thousand ships every day! Why do you think we're here now, throwing away our lives on this stinking ball of mud? Of course there's a risk—I expect it, I'll take it.

"Listen to me, Gilbert Nash: there's a ship out there on the desert that I helped to build, helped to design and power! A ship capable of taking me home. I prostituted myself with an ignorant, stinking savage for more than ten years to get that ship built—lived with him, submitted to him, catered to him, and now I'm going to *take* what's mine. I paid a high price for that ship! I crammed knowledge and discovery into his miserable little head until I was sick at the sight of him, sick of his stupidities and his maudlin gibberish; I fed him technical data until he could have powered that ship with his eyes closed. I coaxed him, flattered him, educated him, *forced* him to build that reaction motor. I wanted to go home! And I'm going—alone."

"Alone, yes." Nash nodded. "I expected that."

"Did you think for a second that I'd take *you*?"

"You couldn't afford to take me, Carolyn. I'd talk—if we got back." The yellow eyes held her fixed in serious study. "You wouldn't want stories about you circulated at home. Not these stories."

"They will have given us up for lost, Gilbert. And they will be glad to find the one last survivor."

"You."

She nodded. "Me."

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"I can picture the gala homecoming," he said dryly. "You'll make a production of it."

"I will pay glowing tribute to your memory, dear mule." She moved like a kitten on the divan, arching her back and smiling at him. "Yours, and poor little Brunna—Santun—Leef—yes, even Raul. You will be heroes, dead heroes buried on a miserable, insignificant ball of mud that will be unsafe to the touch. They will not come searching for you, not when I tell them of this place. They will want to know how I built my ship and I will tell them, with suitable reservations and protective colouration. And after I have told them about this planet they will never again come near it, until it will have swept itself clean of barbaric life. It will be a memorable day when I return home, mule."

"*If* you return home," he reminded her.

"Are you still doubting me, doubting my ability, fool? I can take that ship up, I can pilot it!"

"The ship," he pointed out, "will be radio-controlled from base. It will fly on a preset course."

"The ship," she mocked him prettily, "can easily be disconnected from its radio controls." She leaned forward, tapped her knee with emphasis. "Don't pretend to stupidity, Gilbert. You and I can do or undo anything these pigs have done. Once off the earth, that ship is *mine* to do with as I please! And you know that it won't be too difficult to make contact with our own kind again. Are you familiar with the navigation charts? Do you know where in the universe we are?"

"I lack your specialised knowledge, Carolyn."

"All I need to do, doubting mule, is to blast a certain number of degrees above this system's elliptical plane to reach our trade routes. Our ships are up there now, they're up there all the time, running past this solar system as though it didn't exist. We were on course, Gilbert, when the ship cracked up and we fell here. We were following a well-marked, well-used trade route.

"And that ship of mine out there on the desert will carry me out of this system, carry me up to the trade routes where I will be found. I'm not going to the moon, or to whatever destination that ship is set for. I'm going home! I know the reaction motor in that ship Gilbert, know its possibilities and its limitations. I should know it, I built it. I know that it can carry me above the elliptical plane and start me on the homeward journey. After that I trust to your element of chance, but it's much more of a chance than I have here!"

"Supposing you aren't found right away?"

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"I don't expect to be found right away. I will have what food I can carry, and I have a cache of drugs. If need be, I'll put myself into deepsleep and wait it out. I'm going to stay alive in that ship until I'm found!"

Nash shrugged. "You seem to believe you know all the answers."

"I've had ten thousand years to figure them out," she retorted sarcastically. "And the last ten to perfect them. My late lamented husband would be surprised if he knew—really *knew*—the motor he thought he made. That motor is outsized, mule, outsized and shielded; it requires a *ship* to contain it, not one of your primitive instrument rockets. It was deliberately designed outsize because it would have to carry me as well. And, mule—listen well: in perfectly useless pockets it contains heavy water as supposed moderators, water I will drain off. The only thing for my comfort I could not put into that motor was food. I must risk that."

"Sounds fine," Nash said laconically. "Did you work in a signal too?"

Carolyn laughed delightedly. "That motor will give off an alarm that can be heard all over the universe! It will command attention. In space, mule, uncharted obstacles don't radiate an alarm."

"You almost make me want to go along," he told her. "Almost. Your sales appeal lacks only a little something."

The woman shook her head. "You aren't going, Gilbert. I'm sure I will miss you."

"I'm sure," he repeated. "And so you are going to steal a heavily guarded ship and take off?"

"Gilbert!" She sat stiffly upright, searching his face. "Gilbert, I don't like the way you said that. Were you thinking of stopping me? Of warning them?" She lifted the gun significantly.

"Me?" he asked innocently, and grinned without humour. "Of course not." He settled back on the chair and hooked his thumbs in his belt, contemplating her. "Your actions are disgusting to me; I'll never forgive you for murdering Brunna. But I'm not going to stop you, or warn anyone." He blinked at her. "I offered you a choice a few moments ago. It's still open: you can commit suicide if you wish."

Carolyn suddenly leaped to her feet, staring at him.

"Gilbert . . ."

"Yes?" He knew what was coming.

"Will you kiss me? Or . . .?" She gestured.

"No."

"Please, Gilbert! I must—"

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"Of a sudden," he told her, "you have an idea that you *may* be committing suicide. You want me to kiss you, to find out for you. No."

She ran her hand over the buttons on the pyjama blouse. "Gilbert."

"No."

Carolyn stood by the divan, staring at him with open disbelief. The gun was hanging at her side, forgotten. She jerked at the blouse, ripping off the entire row of buttons to fling the garment on the floor.

Nash leaned back to lock his fingers behind his head. "Pretty," he said.

"Would you like . . . ?"

"No," he repeated.

Carolyn waited there for a long, indecisive moment, glaring at him with vexation. From somewhere outside, some near-by trailer, came the muted sounds of a radio and the crying of a baby. Beyond that a truck could be heard moving along the road with heavily growling motor. Still the woman stood, her fiery eyes fixed on the man's passive face. It was then that she remembered the automatic in her hand.

"I could force you."

"You could try."

"I *could* !" she insisted.

"Try then, and see what happens," he invited. "Take one step, Carolyn, and I'll act in self-defence. You can't very well pilot that ship with both arms broken. Try it—and I'll send you to the hospital for the next month. Your ship will be in the sky by the end of that time." He hadn't moved, hadn't unlocked his fingers from behind his head.

"Gilbert, this is silly ! All I want to do is—"

"All you want to do is kiss me. All you want to do is find out if you will live beyond next week. All you want me to do is look into your evil mind for you." Nash grinned with an inner satisfaction. "They have a phrase in this country. Go to hell."

"You won't do that for me."

"I won't do anything for you unless you accept my offer—the one choice. Remain here."

She stamped her foot in anger. "*You mule* !"

He indicated the discarded pyjama top with a nod of his head. "The show's over. Close the curtains."

"I may as well leave," Nash suggested. "We don't seem to be getting anywhere."

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" Gilbert . . ." She was on the divan, sitting at stiff attention. " You aren't going to warn them ?"

" I've told you twice, Carolyn, I will not prevent your committing suicide. No, I won't warn them, there's no need to warn them. Do you know anything at all about White Sands ? Know how well its guarded ? The radar will find you first and flash a warning to the motor patrols. Or the fence will detect you; the place is surrounded by a very simple electronic fence, Carolyn. If so little as a coyote wanders near that fence, the presence of his body alters the electrical current passing through it and that alteration is registered on the alarm meters. My warnings would be wasted. No, I won't try to stop you."

Carolyn regarded him with distaste. " Your thinking patterns have fallen into human channels, mule. Slovenly. You and I aren't human, remember ? We can force our will on others, or have you forgotten ? Peenemunde was well guarded too, fantastically guarded. That madman's military and secret police shot men out of hand for merely being in the vicinity of the place. And yet I stood fifteen feet away, on the arm of an officer, watching the assembly of a firing mechanism while the rocket lay in its launching cradle." She was laughing at him again. " The bold and open approach is the most successful—the seemingly honest one. I will not go near your wonderful fence, not be found on the desert by radar. Give me more credit than that, Gilbert."

He said humourously, " Going to walk right up and say good morning, I suppose."

" I am, yes." There was a defiance in her manner. " Or something very near to that. I've had ten years to establish a second identity."

Nash did not try to conceal the jolt of that. He sat up on the chair, peering at her. He realised very belatedly that he had underestimated Carolyn Hodgkins. He gave her full credit for the force that had caused her husband to design and build a reaction motor, although he knew it wasn't as good as she thought because she simply didn't have the training. And he gave her due credit for propelling her husband into the right places, to enable him to work on such a motor. Carolyn had accomplished much that was both good and evil in ten thousand years. But he had underestimated her in this one particular; it had never occurred to him that she might have just as carefully prepared a place for herself at White Sands, as she had prepared a ship for her expected journey. He *was* thinking in human patterns ! If Carolyn had waited ten thousand years for this moment, and had spent ten years in planning it, she would certainly not leave the final step to blind chance.

" So that's why you take those vacations away from your husband," he said wonderingly. " And that's why he never knew where you were

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going or how long you would be gone." Of course. Her free and unchallenged entry into the place had been previously prepared, had come before the ship and the motor to allay suspicion. "You were out there, playing another role."

"Gilbert," she exclaimed with evident surprise, "that shook you?"

"Did, yes," he admitted. "I don't see—"

"Oh, you poor plodding mule!" she jeered. "You *have* become like these savages. It's just as well I'm not taking you back with me—you really belong here." She pretended a false pity for his waning intelligence, making a small face for him. "I prepared another identity for myself years ago, as soon as I found an opening. Prepared it well and it is unquestioned today. Humans are terrible weaklings—they seem to believe that strength lies in secrecy and are blind to the weaknesses that walk hand in hand with secrecy. Surely you know human weaknesses, mule? How else do you move about so freely?"

"I've purchased passports," he answered, "and forged them too. They worship money." He gestured beyond her toward the door. "But still. . . ." . .

"My presence on the desert is unquestioned," she replied to his unspoken thought. "And my long absences are unremarked—thanks to the secrecy fetish. You would be quite surprised to observe how easily I may enter and leave White Sands, old mule. Quite surprised!"

"Airtight?" he demanded. "Leakproof?"

"That other identity? Absolutely. As trustworthy as the ship I'm going to hurl into space, Gilbert. The two are inseparable."

Nash gaped at her.

The quick second shock followed hard on the heels of the first, knocking him off his mental balance. She was *in* at White Sands. "Why—Carolyn!" he exclaimed in involuntary astonishment. He could not conceal the glint of dawning admiration in his eyes, admiration for the sheer audacity of the scheming woman. And then, unaccountably, he laughed. Laughed aloud at what she had said and what it meant. He knew, with sudden and smashing certainty, what that second identity was. In truth, Carolyn had taken advantage of the secrecy fetish, placing herself in a position where few others could possibly recognise her as Hodgkins's wife.

What a rude shock one of Cummings's fellow supervisors was in for.

"Well I'll be double damned!" he declared, and then apologised. "That's another phrase they use around here." He stood up. "Carolyn, you're a wonder—and too much for me. You'll never know what you've just done to me." He moved toward the door. "I'm leaving."

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Carolyn whipped up the gun on steady line with his eyes. "You are not leaving." Slowly she arose from the divan, taking care to keep him covered with the automatic.

"I'm leaving," he repeated. "This is finished."

"You can't leave! You'll talk, Gilbert; you'll ruin my chances of escape. You're staying here."

"I promised you—" he began.

"I can't afford to accept your promises," she cut him off curtly. "Not now, not this late. You refused to kiss me, you wouldn't let me see what I wanted to see." Her index finger caressed the trigger. "My one hope of continuing life is sitting out there on the desert, waiting for me to seize it. My ship will be complete in a matter of days, complete and ready to jump, and *then* I'll be on my way home after an eternity of waiting. I can't afford to accept your promises, Gilbert Nash—I can't afford any more risks. I'm going and you are staying. Here, in this cabin."

"Through the mouth?" he asked quietly, "like your dear departed husband?"

"Where you stand!"

They faced each other, tense and waiting. With her own growing tension Carolyn tightened the grip on the trigger. Nash dropped his eyes, concentrated on the muscles of that hand. When he spoke he did not raise his eyes to her face.

"I can kill you in self-defence, Carolyn."

"You can't move faster than a bullet."

He knew that, knew she was taunting him. "Just the two of us, out of a crew of three hundred," he warned her. "I don't want to be the last survivor."

"You won't be, mule!"

Her voice betrayed her. He realised that she was squeezing the trigger. Nash jumped. Not at her, as she expected, but sideways toward the door. His body hit the frail panel with a resounding thud and the booming explosion of the automatic was like an echo. The slug tore into his ear, bit into the side of his skull.

Nash tumbled through the doorway to fall on the crushed rock spread outside. Someone screamed.

## XV.

Ether and flowers.

The flowers were pink roses, a large bunch of them standing in a yellowed vase. The vase rested on a window sill and beyond the sill were the graceful swaying tops of trees, of blue summer sky. A face

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hung somewhere near the roses and the window, hung over the back of a chair, a face which smelled of ether and pink roses. Nash squinted at it, blinked and looked again.

Cummings said, " It's about time."

He sat on a chair that had been turned about, staring at the bed. His arms were folded across the chair top and his face seemed to be resting on his arms.

" Good morning," Nash said to the face. He looked at the blue sky beyond the window. " Good afternoon ?"

" Good afternoon," Cummings reported. " You certainly took your time about it."

" Sorry to have troubled you," Nash said weakly.

" People around here are a little worried."

" About me ?" Nash guessed.

" About you. Something about nonconformity."

" I was afraid of that," Nash confessed.

" I'm also concerned with the same, very much concerned." There was a faint touch of bitterness to his voice. " But I have to wait; the damned doctors hold jurisdiction here. I'm generously allowed fifteen minutes when you wake up."

Nash tried to nod. " *When* I do."

" You haven't yet. My fifteen minutes haven't started. And so I'm concerned about this nonconformity. People here are somewhat upset by a double heart and a double circulatory system. They fail to understand the absence of a vermiform appendix. One or two of them were extremely agitated over the activity or nonactivity of certain endocrine glands." Cummings pursed his lips. " Now me, I'm not too much bothered by details like that because they don't mean much to me. The details are only that—details, added to the whole. The nonconformity of the whole puzzles me." The head moved on the crossed arms, peering at the man on the bed.

" I'll probably disappoint you," Nash replied, " but I can't help it or explain it. That's the way it is."

" That's the way *what* is ?"

" Whatever you're talking about."

Cummings fell silent for a moment, and then tried a different track.

" Wife took a shot at you, eh ?"

" Not my wife."

" No ? My apologies. Sister, maybe ?"

" No relation—for which I'm thankful."

" Where did she go ?" Cummings asked then.

" I didn't have time to watch," Nash retorted dryly. " Things moved rather fast last night."

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"Last night?" The face hanging over the chair lit up in amusement. "Last night was eight days ago."

"*What?*"

"Eight days ago. You seem to have been out of touch with the world; maybe I'd better bring you up to date. You lack a complete ear now, you know, and a bit of your skull. On the other hand you've gained a silver plate—back here." He indicated a spot on the side of his head. "Oh yes—and you had a mouthful of crushed rock. That must have been quite a farewell party last night. It all added up to eight days."

Nash burst out with, "Did the—"

"Did the what?" Cummings followed curiously.

"Nothing."

"Did the *something*," the other persisted. "Did the woman get away from us again? Yes, she did. We don't seem very efficient, do we? Did the trailer-court proprietor raise hell? Yes, he did; you frightened away some of the tenants. Did the farm boy up the hill tell us the story about your ditched car? Yes, he did—he went up to have a look for himself and the location was wrong. Did the what?"

"Did the lady take her trailer with her?"

"The lady took nothing but the clothes on her back—if she was dressed. Was she?" he asked curiously. "It would make a nice love nest for the newspapers." He considered that for a moment. "That's what they're printing, you know."

"Indeed?"

"Indeed. I didn't consider it fitting that they should pry into our affairs—so, the love nest. There was some loose talk of a rape charge against you."

Nash laughed weakly and found that it hurt.

Cummings shushed him. "Our fifteen minutes haven't started yet. You aren't awake."

"Thanks." He looked toward the window. "Roses?"

"Hoffman."

"Nice girl."

"Useless girl. Thanks to you."

"I'm sorry—really am."

"She went in head over heels."

"I suspected that, and intended to stop it."

"Why?" Cummings asked candidly.

"Hell," Nash said, "I'm old enough to be her grandfather!"

"Oh, I don't know," the supervisor said quietly. "Not more than forty-something, according to your police papers."

"All right then, father."

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" I'd judge about thirty, looking at you."

" I feel like an old man."

" My friend," the agent said confidently, leaning forward, " you're going to feel one hell of a lot older when I get through with you ! When this hospital releases you. One hell of a lot older !"

" Cheerful prospect," Nash assured him. " Makes me want to get out of bed now."

" Oh, take your time, take your time. Relax and enjoy yourself, let the pretty nurses wait on you. It'll be your last rest for a long, long time, my friend. I'm going to put you through the works, I promise you !" The head remained motionless over the back of the chair but a smile appeared, a hollow, ghastly smile. " I'm going to ask questions and you are going to answer them—believe me, you'll answer them. You'll start by telling me where you came from, and why. You'll tell me how and where you landed in this country, and when. You'll furnish minute detail of each and every hour of your life from the moment you were born until ' last night ' eight days ago when an ambulance driver picked you off the ground. You'll tell me your exact purpose for being here and exact reason for locating in this city. You'll tell me everything you know about the woman who married Gregg Hodgkins; why she married him, what her connection is to you, and why the two of you conspired to murder him. You'll tell me why the two of you murdered Dikty, why the two of you finally quarelled and she attempted to murder you. You'll tell me why the two of you were interested in the atomic plants, why she married Hodgkins, why Hodgkins came to you and what he said to you. My friend," Cummings promised, " *you'll talk* !"

Nash looked across at him. " I think you mean it."

There was a clatter of quick steps and a flurry of white at the door. A young nurse put her head in to discover Nash awake. " Well ! And how is our patient ?" She glanced at her watch. " My, but you've been sleeping." She threw a fast glare at Cummings. " Why didn't you call me ?" Back to Nash. " Do you want anything ? Resting comfortably ?" Again to Cummings. " I think you'd better leave now. You should have called me." And finally to Nash. " How are you ?"

He answered, " Hello,' and let it go at that.

Cummings tried to explain. " He just a minute ago woke up. He said to me—"

" I *thought* I heard voices in here," the nurse broke in. " I'll call doctor. He will be delighted to hear this." Another glare across the

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room. "You'd best leave, sir." Once more the man on the bed received her professional inspection. "Do you want anything?"

"No." He moved his head to grin at Cummings. "So long, chum. See you in the morning, no doubt."

"*And* the afternoon, *and* the evening, *and* the next morning after that, forever and ever. Don't forget what I said—I mean't it all right!" The supervisor got up from the chair to reveal that a body, after all, was attached to the balancing head. "I'll be here." He crossed over to the door and paused, turning again to look at Nash. "And *just* in case you're entertaining ideas, forget them. You'll find us in the corridor and all around the building." He made a circling motion with his finger.

Nash listened to his fading footfalls outside.

"Is there a man waiting in the corridor?" he asked the nurse.

"Yes, sir."

"And outdoors too?"

"I think so. I haven't seen them but some of the girls were talking."

Nash nodded. "Nurse—there *is* something I want."

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" I thought so !" she grinned triumphantly, and opened a closet door to bring out a pan. " Visitors can be a nuisance at times." She came toward him.

" No, not that !" he protested.

The ready grin faded. " But I thought—"

" Sorry, you misunderstood me. I want information, a newspaper. What's been happening ?"

" Well, I'll try to find one." The grin returned to her youthful face. " You were in them—with a mysterious blonde. It's always a mysterious blonde, isn't it ?" She stood off to examine him. " What did you do to her ?"

" Nothing," he declaimed with mild exasperation, " and I'm not interested in mysterious blondes. Was there anything in the papers about a rocket ship—a space ship ?"

" A space ship ? Well—no. Should there be.?"

" Are you sure ? Nothing at all ?"

" I didn't see anything." The nurse considered him for a moment. " Is it going to the moon or something ?"

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"I don't think so," Nash replied absently, slowly, his thoughts elsewhere. "I don't know, I can only guess. But I doubt very, very much that it's going to the moon. I don't think it was intended for the moon—" he broke off, looked up at the nurse. "May I have a glass of milk? And the papers?"

"Yes, sir." She came nearer the bed and lowered her voice. "That policeman is quite angry with you. He's been storming up and down the corridor for days, just waiting. I hope you haven't done anything wrong. He seems to be making a lot of fuss just over a mysterious blonde."

"That policeman," Nash said, "wants to know the answers to a thousand questions—that's why he's angry with me. And do you know what? If I can't find a way out, a way to evade him and his men outside, I'll just have to stay and answer the questions." He grinned at the girl. "And don't think that won't add to his misery."

## XVI.

*Ground zero*:

The warning signal of red smoke belched from a near-by stack. From one of the underground control bunkers an automatic timer tripped a blaring klaxon each five minutes. There was no movement, no sign of life above ground. Cameras mounted on vertical tracks aimed their lenses at the object; interspersed among them were microphones, already relaying sound back to the tape recorders. The long barrels of the telescopic lenses on television pickups peeped from slots of concrete.

The object resembled a two-step rocket.

The lower half was a rocket, a heavy, squat booster designed only for the purpose of getting the sleek monster above it off the ground. The rocket rested quietly on four fins whose tips stood on concrete bases; its vast bulk was nothing more than a huge fuel tank tapering at the bottom to a rounded, bulging firing chamber and exhaust tubes. It had but one purpose, and was expendable. The rocket's job was to carry its load a certain height where any possible atomic reaction would not harm those who waited below. The height reached, the limited fuel exhausted in one mighty leap, the rocket would cast itself free of the object above it and tumble back to earth, spent. Compact radio controls built into it would steer the ungainly bulk skyward, would control the direction of flight by deflection vanes in the firing chamber, would trigger the release mechanism. No more was asked of the rocket.

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The final five-minute signal had sounded and its echo lost among the hills; now a human voice issued tinnily from a buried bunker, counting off the remaining minutes. The microphones picked up the whirring, clicking sounds of the cameras as those robot eyes went into motion. A sighing wind fled across the baked desert. The minutes had gone and the voice counted seconds.

Kick-off !

Red-yellow-blue flaming fury scorched into the desert sands and the concrete bases were instantly blackened as the rocket vomited fire. A fiery miniature sandstorm arose at the base of the booster, obscuring sight, and then the whole area blossomed into flame. Steel arms of the propping crane fell away, leaving the object standing alone amidst fire and sand. It staggered and began a slow rise.

*One hundred feet* :

The unbeautiful, unpainted monster was going up, gaining speed with each thrust of fuel emitted from its belly. Tongues of fire continued to beat down on the ground, licking at the sand and the steel frames which had contained it. The robotic cameras climbed their vertical ladders, peering at it, and the microphones recorded a mushrooming thunder of deafening sound. The rocket wobbled, creating the false illusion of hesitation, and then zoomed starward as the inner controls arrested command.

*One thousand feet* :

Climbing steadily, climbing fast; the bellowing fire no longer reached the ground and the noise of its passage registered a fraction of a second late on the mechanical ears. The air around it and behind it boiled with heat but still the ugly rocket climbed, pushing its load into the sky. The desert beneath was still with a frightened silence.

*Ten thousand feet* :

Up, always up. The cameras strained at the top of their tracks and could do no more than scan the full sky, seeing the smoky trail left behind, seeing the pale moon lose its daily battle to the brightening dawn. The high, thin smoke trails wavered as they were caught in the moving air currents, wavered and lost all semblance of their original form. The last of the thunderous noises had come, been captured on the recording tapes, and were heard no more. Now a jet-fighter flew in high, wide circles overhead to observe the rocket's ascent, flew madly but was always left behind.

Human eye and glass lens lost sight of the object.

*Forty-five miles* :

The exhaust tubes went suddenly quiet and dead as the fuel tank emptied. The eruption of fire, smoke and sound ceased as the rocket stopped its mad pounding. Its task was complete; tilting now to the

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east it continued to climb but its life was gone. Within its shell an electronic impulse reached out to trip a battery of relays and abruptly the dead hulk found itself alone in the sky. The massive soaring bullet seemed to come apart in the middle as the slim upper portion lifted itself from the useless husk, tore free and screamed away, ever climbing into the east.

Abandoned by the child it had carried so far, the dead rocket continued its futile trajectory into space, faltered, and then lazily turned to begin the long hard fall to earth. It was done, spent.

The slender, needlelike shaft it had carried was already fast vanishing into the rising sun.

*Five hundred miles* :

The great ship hurled itself through space on invisible wings, driven by mastered atomic power. Its long sleek lines were broken in innumerable places by glass eyes peering out, up, down, all around; the extended tubular nacelle jutting from its nose suggested a radio antenna. The ship barrelled a swathe through the colourless vacuum, tilting more and more to the eastward until its line of flight suggested a horizontal rather than a vertical climb. Silently, without flame or back-thrusting thunder it ripped into space.

Swiftly it travelled and still it continued to pile speed upon speed, as though rushing to meet the maximum demanded of it before its own fuel supply gave out and the drive motor failed. The initial thrust alone would keep it moving forever. The vessel plunged majestically through the airless sky.

*One thousand-plus miles* :

The ship had reached its assigned orbit and was already flattened out on a horizontal trajectory, already beginning its first historic trip around the earth.

It would hang there, continually circling the earth with terrific speed until eternity or until it was intercepted, looking, peering, searching the secretive world below, reporting all that it saw back to those bunkers beneath the New Mexican desert. Hodgkins's ship was an orbital observation station, designed to circle the earth each two hours until the end of time. Some three minutes after blasting away from the desert sands it had reached its destination.

Time had already ended for Carolyn Hodgkins.

*Wilson Tucker*

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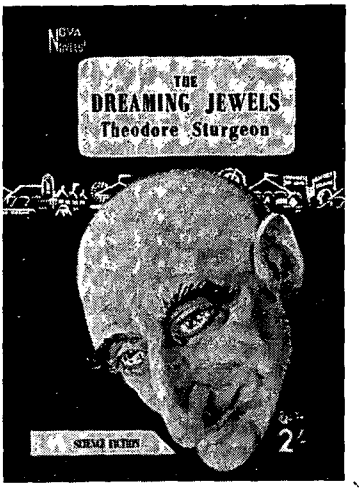


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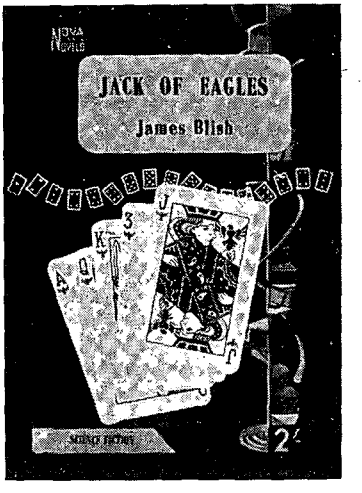


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